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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT OF *WESTERN UNION* BY ZANE GREY

"Hello, handsome. Don't you want to dance with me?"

Western Union, Chap. 4

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 12—February, 1948

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THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT

IN "WESTERN UNION," Zane Grey has based an exciting novel on the engrossing story of the stringing of the first transcontinental telegraph wire—the history-making line of communication stretching over prairie, mountains, and timberland; and with it the story of Wayne Cameron, the Boston tenderfoot who finds himself a member of the hardy, pioneering crew that toils and battles and carouses its way across the face of America.

Cameron, having fruitlessly studied law for one year and medicine for another, has finally decided that his vital need is to escape the frustrating confines of the settled East into open, untamed country where he can feel the breath of freedom. In 1861 this naturally means the great West, and as the story opens he is boarding a westbound stagecoach in Omaha—as he puts it, at the end of his resources and the end of his rope.

In the wide-open town of Gothenburg, Cameron meets a trio of young Westerners who fire his imagination and command his loyalty: Vance Shaw and Jack Lowden, Texas cowboys, and Tom Darnell, fugitive from the impending range war in Wyoming. Casting their lot together, these four develop into a pivotal squad in the army of workers under the command of the dynamic Edward Creighton, boss of the Western Union outfit. Cameron also makes the acquaintance of Joe Slade, freighter, gambler, and gunman; an appealing dance-hall girl named Ruby; and Kit Sunderlund, the beautiful, fiery-tempered daughter of a Texas cowman who is driving his herd of longhorns to the fabulous Sweetwater range.

The obstacles that beset Creighton and his builders are legion: raids by hostile Indians and predatory white men: the never-ending search for poles where there are no poles; the menace of stampeding hordes of buffalo and all-consuming prairie fires; the task of crossing a river at full flood.

A potent story indeed is this epic of the Old West, firing the imagination with a thrilling chapter from America's frontier past and colored with all the romance and flaming action which have made its author the favorite writer of millions of readers.

Coming in the March issue of

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

a magazine abridgment of

THE BORDER LEGION

The story of a resourceful outlaw leader, a daring frontier beauty, and a range-riding son of the border.

DON'T MISS IT!

ON SALE ABOUT FEBRUARY 5

Western Union

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

Young Man Goes West

IT was a summer day in 1861 when I boarded a westbound stagecoach in Omaha, Nebraska, at the end of my resources and the end of my rope.

I put back in my pocket the newspaper clipping which had been responsible for giving me inspiration at a time when I needed it most. At 24 years, everything I had tried had somehow failed to hold me. I had long been in doubt whether or not there was anything really in me.

My father wanted me to try law, so I went to Harvard for a year, then gave that up. Then I tried medicine for a year. No good. I had interest in medicine, but I could not stay indoors and study. Those two frustrated years, however, revealed to me what was the matter.

I needed to get away from Boston and New England, out somewhere in the open country, preferably the West, where I would be free. Outside of being big and strong and active on my feet, I had no qualifications that I knew of for pioneer life in the West. Nevertheless, it was the West that called increasingly to me.

Then I had been troubled about the rumblings of war between the North and the South. Now it was a fact. My father was a Southerner by birth and strong in his feelings against the Yankees.

I did not feel that I would not have made a good soldier because there was something about a soldier's free

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life for adventure and danger that appealed to me. Still, with my parents split on the issue of a civil war, I seemed between the devil and the deep sea. So altogether my dissatisfaction and unhappiness drove me to undertake the long journey to the West.

As I looked around me, I suddenly noticed that I was the first person aboard the stage. In fact, even the driver himself was nowhere about. But finally the other passengers began to arrive.

There were two soldiers, a keen-eyed man whom I took to be a rancher, and a buxom woman who was evidently his wife. Another passenger had climbed to the driver's seat. The last one might have been a well-to-do merchant. He took the seat beside me.

As we were about to roll into the open country a clamor of friendly voices arose, bidding us good-by. I could see the departure of this creaking vehicle was an event for the townspeople, and I seemed to feel that some of the good-bys ringing in my ears were for me.

The Platte River ran to our left. The low banks were lined with willows and cottonwoods just beginning to be clothed with bright green. I had my second glimpse of the great, wide Missouri River running bank full.

Soon we were out of sight of the river and the town, rolling along at a good clip over a hard-packed road which seemed to run in the center of a number of roads. There were old wheel tracks and fresh wheel tracks on each side.

I gathered, presently, that we were bound out on a branch of the Overland Trail, which was the Oregon Trail, for years the thoroughfare from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon. We would come into the main Oregon Trail at Grand Island.

My seat was next to the open window through which I gazed at the winding stream and the level gray plain extending into what appeared to be infinitude. At intervals we passed ranches and scattered cattle, but we were on the edge of wild country.

Presently the gentleman sitting next to me made several affable remarks as to the weather and the pleasant ride, and finally inquired where I was bound.

"I'm going out to work on the Western Union," I replied.

"Indeed! That is very interesting. I'm on my way out to take a look at the work myself. My name is Williamson."

"I'm glad to meet you, sir. My name is Wayne Cameron, from Boston."

"I thought as much," replied the other, with a laugh. "New Englanders are rather easy to tab. Myself, I'm from New York. What sort of a job have you got with the telegraph company?"

"I haven't any—yet—but I hope to get one."

"You won't find much trouble on that score—what with the war and all, they're finding it hard to get men anyway."

Williamson said that construction work had already started from the Pacific coast under an engineer named Gamble, who was to build the telegraph line east to meet Edward Creighton's crew, who, by this time, had almost strung their threadlike iron wire to Gothenburg.

Presently Williamson asked, "Cameron, are you familiar with Creigh-

ton's trip across the plains and the mountains to study the land and conditions?"

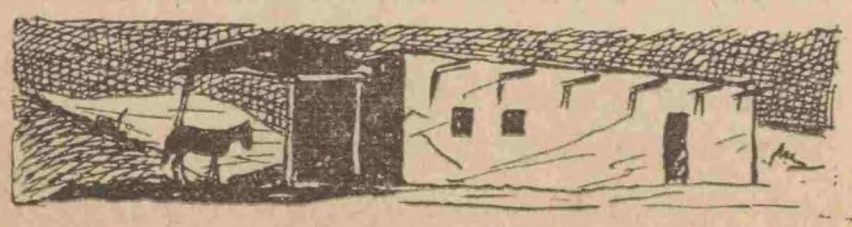
"Yes, I read about it," I replied. "I think it was heroic."

"It was that and more. Creighton is a wonderful character. I heard Hiram Sibley tell about Creighton's trip across the divide to the coast. It really beggared description. He rode six or seven hundred miles via horseback over some of the wildest country. When he arrived in Carson City he was more dead than alive."

I turned often to glance at the telegraph line to which Williamson had long since called my attention. The shining yellow peeled poles, the single thread of wire stretching away westward—these seemed somehow to be so little, so insignificant, so frail, to carry the tremendous weight and importance of rapid communication between the East and West.

By sundown we arrived at a commodious ranch house where we were to spend the night. In the morning, we were soon away again rolling westward along the Oregon Trail, sometimes within sight of the Platte River and always with wide and increasing stretches of prairie land from ranch to ranch.

That night when we made our stop, this time at a hamlet where there was a store and a saloon and a few shacks, I made overtures to the stagecoach driver. I asked him to have a drink with me, and presently found him to be affable enough and most intensely interesting. The passenger who had ridden on the seat with him departed at this station and I eagerly asked to have his place.



Jim Hawkins had been driving stagecoaches for ten years, and I simply reveled in the thought of what a mine of information he was and what opportunity I would have while I was with him through the long hours on the driver's seat.

I faced the next day's drive high on the driver's seat in the bright sunlight. I called the driver's attention to dust clouds on the horizon and a long irregular line low down along the ground that was new to me.

"Wal, young man," he replied, "I reckon there ain't nothin' the matter with your eyesight. Thet's your first wagon train. An' it's a purty big one. You'll see plenty of wagon trains from now on an' beyond Ft. Kearney; unless it's a thumpin' big one, you'll see they hev an escort of soldiers."

"That sergeant riding with us told me that the telegraph construction work would have to go on under the guardianship of dragoons. Is that necessary altogether on account of the Indians?"

"Mostly, I'd say," returned the driver. "The Cheyennes air gettin' mean again, but they ain't a marker for the Sioux. You'll meet them west of Ft. Laramie an' along the Sweetwater, an' up toward South Pass. All the tribes of redskins hev a grievance against the whites an' it ain't no wonder. An' some day, when the whites begin killin' off the buffalo fer their hides, all the Indians from the Dakotas to the Rio Grande will rise up to fight like the devils they air. Fer the buffalo air their living."

"But I've read that there are millions of buffalo," I said.

Hawkins shook his grizzled head. "Buffalo an' deer an' all game would last forever if they were hunted only by the Indians. White men are mostly wasters, as well as bein' greedy and unscrupulous. I know an old Indian onct who said white men were heap hogs."

"But there is such a thing as progress," I protested. "America has to expand. The tide of empire has set toward the West."

"Shore, son, shore you're right," replied Hawkins. "Thet's as true as we're sittin' here. But it doesn't do 'way with the fact thet this was red man's country, thet he was depraved by liquor, thet he has been robbed, an' will go on bein' robbed until he rebels an' fights against overwhelmin' odds until what's left of him will be driven back into the waste places of the West. Jest how it is in the sight of God, I cain't reckon. But in mine it shore ain't a purty picture."

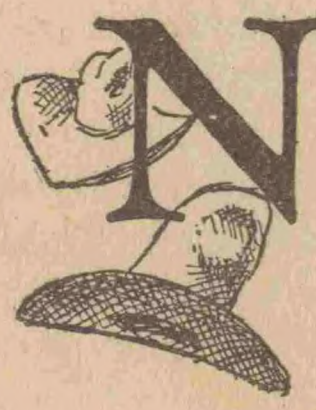
We rapidly rolled on to catch up with the wagon train. Before we reached it I counted the big prairie schooners. There were 63 of them. They were hauled by yokes of oxen. Along each side men on horseback rode with them. Here and there were wagons that did not have a canvas cover.

As we went by with Hawkins and some of the passengers in the coach cheerily calling, the pioneers returned the expressions of good will and good luck. As we drove by one of the big prairie schooners, I espied a pretty girl sitting beside a stalwart, gray-headed driver. Her eyes met mine as we drove alongside for a moment and I felt that I should not soon forget them or the luster of her rippling hair. I waved my sombrero at her and she smiled and raised a gauntleted hand. Then she was gone back out of sight, and wagon by wagon took the place of the one she had ridden in.

I felt a pang when I realized that there was a girl that I could have liked and would surely never see again.

CHAPTER TWO

The Forming of the Four



NOTHING in the next several days took the thrilling place of that wagon train. Grand Island, where we arrived one night after dark, seemed like all the other Nebraska stops, only there were more buildings, more lights, and more people. Our next stop was Ft. Kearney where we lost our soldier passengers. It appeared to be just a barracks and I was disappointed.

We rolled on west of Kearney. One day I saw a moving dot away along the road and thin puffs of dust so far away that I could not make out what they were.

"Driver, what's that coming?" I asked.

"Wal, if I'm kerrect," he replied after a long squint down the road, "thet'll be Jed Schwartz. Along here is where he usually passes me. He's a Pony Express rider."

It was amazing how that moving black spot enlarged until it stood out in the outline of a horse and rider. As he drew closer I saw that the horse was stretched out, running low and level, his mane and tail flying, and the rider's scarf burned in the sunlight and waved out behind him.

Hawkins guided his teams to the right and gave the Express rider an open road. He bore down on us like the wind and as he flashed by, too swiftly for me to see anything clearly, he waved his gloved hand at Hawkins and yelled a greeting. The driver answered just as lustily.

In response to my inquiries Hawkins said, "I reckon this here telegraph line you're goin' to help build will spell the end of the Pony Express. Some mighty fine fellers will be out of jobs, but I reckon they'll be glad to quit with their scalps still on. I've known some mighty fine fellers on the Pony Express. Jed Schwartz is about the best of the lot. He's a hard, fearless rider. He packs two guns an' say can he use 'em!"

Next day we caught up with a small wagon train hauling telegraph poles. I was thrilled because I knew at last we were approaching our destination. We reached Gothenburg quite a while after dark. The same dull yellow lights, the same dusty road, the same shacks and tents, and high board fronts with which I had become familiar, appeared to compose this town of Gothenburg.

"Son, this is a purty hot place," admonished Hawkins with a chuckle. "I wouldn't advise you to miss seein' what's goin' on, but mind your p's and q's. I reckon the construction camp is here or close by and the burg will be lively. You're shore likely to be taken fer a tenderfoot. Wal, don't take no back talk from nobody. When you go into Red Pierce's gamblin'-hell, if you've got any money, look out fer the painted ladies an' steer clear of the gamin'-tables."

The tavern which took care of the travelers was unprepossessing from the outside, but inside it proved to be comfortable with a clean room and bed and a supper to which I certainly did ample justice. There were two girls waiting on tables and one of them was decidedly pretty.

After supper I thought I would stroll down the street and look things over. As I went out, Williamson accosted me and said with hearty satisfaction:

"Well, Cameron, we've arrived. The construction work and Creighton's traveling camp are only a few miles from here. The town is full of workers. I'll keep a lookout for Creighton and I'll tell him about you if he comes into town."

I thanked him and then went outside on the plank walk and tried to accustom my eyes to the opaque darkness dimly lighted by yellow lamps. There were saddle horses tied to hitching-rails in front of the tavern and several vehicles, one of which was a buckboard. I saw a few pedestrians but not enough to account for the noise that seemed to come from the main square down the street.

Presently I walked in that direction and began to encounter a motley string of men, a score or more in all. There were cattlemen and cowboys, but, for the most part, the pedestrians appeared to be laborers.

A little farther on I came to a large, crude-looking edifice constructed of boards and made emphatic by reason of the wide-open door from which bright lights streamed and men were passing in and out. I saw a painted sign above this door with the rude letters spelling *Red Pierce.* I entered.

The place was an enormous hall with three huge lamps strung down

the middle and a long bar at the left where men stood two or three deep, drinking and laughing and talking. To the right, opposite the bar, were a number of tables around which the gamblers were sitting and standing. I heard the rattle of the roulette wheel and the musical clink of coins, but if there were any voices among these players, they were silenced by the louder clamor of those at the bar.

At that juncture there burst out a lively flare of music and I looked down the hall to see a number of men standing around an open space on the floor where several couples were dancing. At that distance the girls appeared to be attractive and showed white faces and scarlet lips and bare arms.

There were spectators at the gambling-tables and I joined them to look on for a while. When I tired of this I walked back to the lower end of the hall and watched the dancers. Presently the dance ended and one of the girls came up to me. I certainly did not remember ever being looked over as I was then.

"Would you like to dance?" inquired the girl, smiling up at me. She had a nice voice and she did not look at all like a dance-hall girl to me.

"Yes," I replied diffidently, "but I'm an utter stranger, just got in, and I feel—"

As I hesitated she took my arm and interrupted. "Strangers come every day. Let's dance. I'll soon make you feel at home."

I was about to surrender to her suggestion, not without pleasurable sensations, when she was rudely torn away from me by a tall, dark young man, a rowdy in appearance and certainly under the influence of drink.

"Come on, Ruby," he said in a thick voice. "What d'ye mean grabbin' that tenderfoot? You promised this dance to me."

He whirled her away, though hardly before I became aware that it was much to the girl's distaste. She flashed me another smile which was reassuring, to say the least.

I watched the gamblers for a while. I was approached by several men, certainly not workmen, who looked me over with sharp eyes as if they could pierce through my clothes into my pockets. They asked me to participate in this game and that. I declined.

I changed my position to one behind some spectators beside the roulette table and I was unmolested for a while. Then I watched the poker game at another table.

Then my attention was distracted, and so was that of everyone in the hall, by a fight outside on the walk. There were loud voices, scuffling boots, and a gunshot—after which there was silence. The players resumed their gambling and a few men left the bar to peer out the door to see what had caused the excitement. I joined them but could not discover any signs of what had surely been a fight.

I asked a bystander if there were any officers of the law in that town and he laughed at me. As I was moving away from the gambling-tables, I was accosted by three men, one of whom was the rowdy who had snatched the girl off of my arm. He said something to the man in the middle

about me being the fellow. This central figure in the trio was a short, low-browed man with prominent eyes and a leering look.

"Stranger hereabouts, huh?" he asked. "What's your business here?"

"That's my business," I replied tersely.

"Well, Yankee sticks out all over you, young fella. And if it didn't stick out, we sure could hear it."

"Certainly I'm a Yankee," I replied, beginning to feel heat in my veins.

"Suppose you set up the drinks," he suggested insolently.

"I won't do anything of the kind, and if I buy drinks I'll choose those with whom I want to drink."

"See hyar, tenderfoot," interposed the dark-faced rowdy. "I take that as an insult. And it's too much comin' after your gettin' fresh with my girl."

"You're drunk or crazy," I returned hotly. "I didn't get fresh with your girl."

Then without much ado he slapped my face and not by any means lightly. I lunged out and knocked him sprawling to the floor. Some of the gamblers noticed the incident, then reverted to the game, while some bystanders laughed. Out of the corner of my eye, as I watched my assailant slowly get up from the floor, I saw two figures come in the door and move around sideways. One figure was tall and slim and the other was short and bowlegged.

The man who had been the first to accost me pulled his gun and extended it low down, almost pointed at my feet. "Tenderfoot, you'll order drinks for us and dance a little to boot."

"Mister, I won't do anything of the kind," I rang out at him.

"Aw, yes, you will. Do some fancy steppin' now or I might hit your leg."

"You go to hell! Isn't this a free country out here?"

"Dance, tenderfoot," he howled in fiendish glee, and his gun spouted red and banged at my feet.

I felt the burn of a bullet grazing me above my ankle. I was stunned and suddenly divided between fury and terror.

I had no idea how I would have further reacted to that situation but I was spared the painful decision by a sharp gunshot which rang out behind me. With a loud yell the bully dropped his gun clattering to the floor and clapped a hand to his shoulder. I saw blood spurt out between his fingers. He was suddenly transformed into a different man, his face showing an agony of pain and extreme fright.

Then into my sight from one side strode the two figures I had before caught out of the corner of my eye. The tall one held a smoking gun extended and as he stepped, he moved it slightly indicating the door.

"Hombre, thet's the second time today you've bothered me," he drawled in a cool, easy, soft speech. "Beware of the third time!" And again the smoking gun made that slight unmistakable move toward the door.

The three were quick to take the hint. One picked up the gun from the floor and the three of them hurriedly left the saloon. At that the sudden silence was broken again by the sound of voices and the rattle of the roulette wheel.

I turned away from the last sight of my assailants to confront my rescuer. He was in the act of sheathing the long gun and his peculiarly light eyes were fastened on the men at the bar, some of whom had protested at

the fracas.

"Much obliged—you did me a mighty good turn," I burst out, as he turned to face me. He had a young, still smooth face, tanned to a gold hue. Then his companion addressed me.

"Thet hombre must hev hit you," he said. "Yore laig is kinda quiverin'. 'Spose you let me take a look." And he went down on one knee and ran his hands over my left leg. "Ahuh, hyar's a hole in yore pants—but I don't feel any blood— Wal, he jest burned you an' you shore air plum lucky. He might've busted a bone." He rose to his feet, his ruddy, homely face wreathed in a grin. "Purty close shave," he went on. "Most times a tenderfoot has to pay a damn sight more than thet to git by the bad place."

"Fellows, I knew I was a tenderfoot all right, but I just didn't know how to react to that situation."

"You didn't do so bad," returned the little fellow with friendliness. "We was listenin' an' watchin'. You shore socked thet mean hombre an' I was tickled to death to see him git it. He reckons he owns thet dance-hall gurl, Ruby, an' he's daid wrong. She was nice to me an' particular nice to Vance hyar."

"Stranger, mebbe you will drink with us?" asked the tall fellow.

"I will—I certainly do need a bracer."

He led the way to the bar where at one end the customers were obviously eager to give him room and presently we were lined up facing each other with glasses in hand.

"My name's Wayne Cameron, from Boston. I'm out here to go to work on the telegraph line."

"Wal, Cameron, you shore didn't need to tell us you were a Yankee," returned the little fellow with a laugh. "Thet ain't so good out hyar. My pard hyar, Vance Shaw, is a dyed-in-the-wool rebel an' I'm from Missouri. But mebbe we kin git along together. I 'most forgot. My name is Jack Lowden."

I shook hands with him and then with Shaw. Then we proceeded to take our drinks.

"I take it you're cowboys?" I queried.

"Yep, jest plain cowhands, so far as shootin' an' ridin' air concerned."

"Will you have a drink on me?" I asked.

"No thanks. One's enough," replied Shaw. "Let's get out of here. Ruby's spotted me an' I've a hunch she'll edge this way. If she gets another dance with me I'll have to bore thet mean hombre proper."

"Wal, hell!" exclaimed Lowden. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"I reckon," rejoined Shaw thoughtfully. "More 'n a fellow ought to like a dance-hall girl. But she's only sixteen years old—kinda fresh an' innocent yet, an' I feel sorry for her."

We went outside and stood in the bright light to the right of the wide doorway. I asked my new acquaintances to come down to the tavern with me and have a smoke and a talk.

"Shore'd like to," returned Shaw. "But let's hang here for a little. I'm lookin' for someone."

"Hell, pard, you've been lookin' fer thet Texas hombre since we left the Rio Grande," said Lowden with disdain. "We'll never run into him way up hyar around the north pole." We lounged at ease outside the gambling-hall.

"Cameron, what did you think about thet hombre who jest braced us?" Lowden demanded.

Thus appealed to, I frankly unburdened myself of my impressions of the fellow. Lowden replied with a snort of satisfaction.

"See there, pard. Our Yankee tenderfoot is purty durn keen. Thet feller is a purty sad case. Wouldn't you say he's on the dodge?"

"Reckon I got thet hunch. Thet cowboy has killed somebody an' not very long ago. But I wouldn't take him for crooked."

No more was said at the moment and the cowboys resumed their watching of the passers-by and I fell to doing likewise. There were not so many pedestrians now as there had been earlier in the evening.

Presently I saw a couple of Indians approaching. They were far from the dignified, romantic specimens that my imagination had conjured up. Their short, bulky forms were blanketed, their black hair fell over their shoulders, and their swarthy features were interesting but not attractive. They shuffled along on moccasined feet and their short bowlegs showed beneath the blankets.

The luckless cowboy came out of the restaurant and approached us directly. "Fellers, I'm glad you waited. I shore feel a different man."

"Wal, when a starved man gits his belly full again, it does make a difference. I've been there."

Here I suggested that we all go down to my quarters where we could have a drink and a smoke and talk.

"Where's yore hoss?" queried Shaw of the cowboy.

"I staked him out of town a ways. Only a patch of grass, but it'll do for him tonight. I'll go back to him by and by."

The big hall in the barnlike tavern was crowded so I took my acquaintances to my quarters. It was a large room, bare, with four bunks and very little furniture, and the lamp gave a rather inadequate light. I told the fellows to make themselves at home while I tried to find another lamp and something to drink and smoke. The proprietor told me there was not anybody else to occupy that room but myself and I replied that I might have my friends stay there that night. I returned with the articles, and the new lamp gave a more cheerful atmosphere.

"Now, fellows," I said cheerfully, "here's some smokes and drinks. I hope we can get acquainted." I told them briefly about myself and ended up by mentioning how glad I was to meet them, not to say thankful for their help.

"Wal, Wayne," drawled Shaw smiling for the first time, "if I can just get around yore bein' a Yankee, I reckon we'll get along tiptop."

"Hell, pard, there ain't any war out hyar yet," said Jack Lowden, "an' mebbe there never will be."

"Aw, it's as shore as death. If you were from Texas instead of Missouri you'd have seen thet long ago."

"Listen, Shaw," I interposed, "my house is one divided against itself. My mother is a Yankee and my father is a Southerner. His business keeps him in the North, but his heart is in his homeland."

"Holy Moses!" ejaculated Lowden. "Thet makes you half a rebel anyhow."

"Wal, fellers, thet puts a different complexion on Cameron," said Shaw.

Shaw was tall and slim, a magnificently built horseman, broad-shouldered, small-hipped. He wore dark blue jeans much the worse for wear and dusty in places. He smelled of leather and horseflesh and smoke. He wore high-topped, high-heeled boots, practically worn out.

His gun belt was dark except where the shiny tips of shells showed, and the sheath, also dark, hid all but the black butt of the big gun. Over his blouse he wore a thin vest. His sombrero was dusty and full of holes. The wide brim, however, did not hide his fair clustering hair.

Despite his striking get-up, his face fascinated me most. From side view it was clear-cut as a cameo, dark, cold, at once a youthful face, yet in shadow seeming to show under the smooth skin the lines and ravages of havoc. He had the most extraordinary eyes I had ever looked into. I warmed to him.

Lowden presented a vivid contrast to his comrade. He was small of stature, sturdy and powerful, with arms too long for his body and legs markedly bowed from living much on horses. In repose his ugly face was hard and lined. His eyes were blue.

Shaw kept silent while his partner, watching just as sharply, made caustic remarks about the pedestrians. Suddenly Lowden's tone showed more than casual interest.

"Pard, look hyar. See thet cowboy edgin' closer? He's gonna brace us. Gosh, he looks down on his luck. Ragged, worn out, beard uncut, an' he's been sleepin' in the brush all right."

The individual so indicated was now coming toward us, hesitatingly at first, and then, as if finding our scrutiny favorable, with more assurance. He had fierce dark eyes in which I detected a shadow of hope. He stopped abreast of us.

"Howdy, cowboys," he said.

"Howdy yourself," returned Jack, friendly enough.

"I wanta ask if you'll buy a grand hoss?"

"What's wrong with the cowboy who'll sell his grand hoss?" returned Shaw curtly.

"Why do you suppose, man?" flashed the cowboy. "I've been ridin' the grub line for days, an' believe me, camps an' ranches are few and far between along this old trail. I'm 'most starved to death."

"Wal, thet's reason enough," returned Shaw thoughtfully. "We won't buy yore grand hoss, but we'll see thet you eat. Is thet all yo're lookin' for?"

"Thank you, cowboy. Good Lord, it's so long since I looked for anythin' else that I've forgotten what there might be to look for."

Lowden took a step forward and interposed. "Cowboy, you could have struck wuss fellers then us, if I do say it myself. You kin talk or not as you like. My pard hyar is from Texas an' I'm his ridin' hand. This big gazabo with us is a Yankee from down East, but we reckon he's all right."

"I wouldn't mind talkin' after I get somethin' to eat an' a drink," returned the stranger.

"Hyar, 'scuse us fer bein' so thick. Take this money. There's a purty good eatin'-place next door. Go in there and fill up. We'll be hyar a while—*if* you want to come back."

The cowboy took the money with a grateful look, and without a word, hurried to the door of the restaurant and went in.

"An' I reckon we'll get along just about fine. Now, Jack, you tell him an' our new comrade here who we are an' what we're doin' here."

"Thet's easy," returned Jack, puffing a huge cloud of smoke. "An' I kin do it short an' sweet. We're jest a couple of no-good cowboys from the Rio Grande. It got kinda hot fer us down there an' as there were no jobs to be had with wages, we reckoned we'd do well to ride a grub line north. It was months ago when we started an' I fergit about what happened on the way. Down in the Panhandle we heared a rumor about this telegraph line goin' to be built across the plains an' what a hell of a job it was goin' to be so we made north an' hyar we air."

"How long have you been here, Vance, and what do you know about this Western Union work?" I inquired.

"We've only been here a coupla days, but thet was a long enough time to get in bad with some mean hombres on account of that girl, Ruby. An' to find out thet the laying of this telegraph line will beat any deal ever made in the West, *if* it can be done. I've seen this man Creighton. I've heard him talk. An' I just figure thet he rings like steel."

"I had the same opinion," I replied. "Maybe we can all get work with him."

Jack said, "I hev my doubts about Vance an' me. We jest hate work, thet is, diggin' fence holes, workin' on yore feet, cuttin' an' sawin' wood an' all sich work as thet."

"Don't worry, pard," rejoined Vance. "Creighton will never build this line without riders an' hunters an' Injun fighters. There's where we qualify an' I can make him see it pronto."

"That accounts for three of us," I said, and I looked inquiringly at the fourth member of our party.

He had been sitting a little in the background and had not entered into our conversation. At this juncture he got up and came into the light. "Fellers," he began huskily, "I've had a hunch ever since I met you. But I can't tell whether or not I ought to come clean about myself—or whether or not I should jest keep on ridin'."

"Cowboy, tell us or not, jest as you like," spoke up Shaw. "I reckon I can speak up for Cameron an' for my pard, Jack, here, an' shore for myself."

"Much—obliged, Shaw," returned the cowboy haltingly, struggling against his emotion. "My Gawd, how I'd like to throw in with you!"

"I reckon you've got the hunch you need," said Shaw, his voice ringing.

"Look here," burst out the cowboy, almost violently, and facing us in the lamplight he threw off his coat, and unbuttoning his ragged, soiled shirt he removed it in one swift action. It showed him to have a wonderful muscular development, but he was trained down too thin for his size. Then with tragic and shamed eyes he added hoarsely, "This ain't so damn easy to do."

Turning abruptly he showed us his back. It was a mass of black and blue welts and cuts, some of them not altogether yet healed. My eyes were riveted on these great stripes, some of which were swollen and stood out at least an inch from his back. Not one of us spoke. Then he turned around with a deep long breath and swiftly got into his shirt again.

"Hell an' blazes, man!" exclaimed Jack.

"Cowboy, hangin' could be no wuss," said Shaw.

"Fellers, I'm glad I had the guts to show you," spoke up the cowboy in relief, "an' I can see from your faces that you jest bet I did not deserve that beatin' or I wouldn't have showed you."

"Strikes me thet way," said Lowden. "But, hell, feller, you'd never hev showed us if you didn't intend to tell."

"Reckon that's so," admitted the cowboy. "Four or five hundred miles is a long way in this country. Mebbe it is far enough to be safe. Listen. My name is Darnell. I've only been in Wyomin' a few years, at the head of the Sweetwater River in the western part of the territory. Best cattle range in all the West.

"All the cowboys I knew of stole mavericks. It got to be a bad habit. It made the cattlemen madder than hell. But I was ketched red-handed in the act. They made me a prisoner an' kept me tied an' locked up for days. I didn't have anythin' to eat but bread an' water. I wouldn't tell what they wanted to know because that involved the honor of a woman. So finally the two heads of the cattle outfits on our range took me at night out into the willows along the river an' tied me up an' stripped me. They built a big bonfire so they could see.

"The half a dozen or more men who were hired to do the dirty work wore masks an' they didn't talk, so I never recognized them. But the two ranchers didn't hide their faces. They had my arms stretched up with ropes an' they told me that if I didn't give away what they wanted to know, they'd beat me half to death. I laughed in their faces an' cussed them out. One man after another beat me until the willows broke in their hands. But I never opened my mouth. They gave me another chance to squeal. All I spit out was that as shore as God made little apples, I'd kill those two cattlemen.

"Then they had me beaten again until my blood splattered in the faces of the fellers who were doin' it an' finally they got so sick they wouldn't beat me any more. I was taken back to the cellar where they held me an' three days later I made my escape. I stole a hoss an' rode bareback up out of the valley to the South Pass. It was morning when I got there. People seen me as I rode through town with my bleedin' back like a red flag.

"I run into two cowboys I knew an' they lent me a saddle an' this gun I'm packin' an' these clothes I'm wearin'. An' they told me there was a cattleman convention in town right then. An' I asked if the two ranchers I'd sworn to kill were with them. They were. I rode down into town an' scattered a crowd in front of the place an' busted in to brace these two cattlemen. I killed them both an' I rode out of town an' I've been ridin' ever since.

"I'd never stopped at all if it hadn't been for my hoss. I don't know how many days it is since I left South Pass, but I could tell you the few times I've had any grub. That's my story, fellers, an' I swear it's the truth."

After a moment of intense silence Vance Shaw spoke coolly. "I reckon thet calls for a drink." We followed his suggestion and presently the situation seemed to grow easier.

Lowden said, "I need a little fresh

air as much as I did a drink. Darnell, what say to my goin' out with you an' hevin' a look at yore hoss? There's a livery stable hyar at this place an' thet hoss shore deserves to be fed proper an' be bedded down."

Then I spoke up to say, "There are four bunks here. Why not all of you or some of you stay here with me tonight?"

They all agreed readily enough and Shaw and I went out with them to the street and watched the two out of sight. Then we returned to my room.

"I shore knew somethin' turrible had happened to thet cowboy," said Shaw thoughtfully. "If we can get thet feller to stick here with us, we'll be doin' him a good turn an' mebbe ourselves, too. He's been alone too much."

"It puzzles me. Of course I can't figure western things. He said he was caught red-handed stealing—what was that he said?"

"Mavericks. A maverick is an unbranded calf thet you find on the range, an' if you find one without its mother yo're not stealing when you take charge of it yoreself."

"But to beat him that way! He said he wouldn't give something away—that it involved the honor of a woman. What is your angle on that?"

"Lord knows. I haven't any yet. But I've a hunch there's a hell of a mess out there in the Sweetwater Valley an' we're goin' to run plumb into it. Thet's a long ways though. Mebbe we'll not last thet long."

"We will last," I replied decidedly.

"Wal, thet's the way to feel," responded Shaw. "I see you tryin' to roll a cigarette cowboy-fashion. You make an awful job of it. Let me show you how. If there's one thing thet brands a tenderfoot, it's the way he rolls a cigarette."

I spoiled a dozen cigarettes before I actually caught the trick. Shaw was good enough to say that I would do. His remark pleased me.

Presently Jack Lowden returned with Darnell. "Say, pard," blurted out Jack, "this Wyomin' cowpuncher has got a hoss thet's every bit as good as mine an' I'll bet he'll give yore hoss Range a run fer yore money."

"We put him in the barn here," said Darnell, "and believe me, Wingfoot acted like he appreciated it."

"Wingfoot? Thet's shore a flatterin' name. Wal, we'll see."

"I ain't gonna risk havin' Wingfoot beat, not to say startin' any argument with you fellers," said Darnell.

Shaw responded quickly to that. "You mean yo're goin' to throw in with us?"

"Fellers, I'm throwin' in with you an' I swear to heaven you'll never be sorry," Darnell vowed.

"We'll gamble on thet," responded Shaw with another of his inspiring smiles. "Now let's all turn in. We're all tired, an' Darnell is about daid on his feet. Tomorrow is another day with a hell of a lot to look forward to."

Little more was said after that. Before both lamps were extinguished I observed that the cowboys' preparations for bed were to remove their boots, spurs and all. However, true to an old habit, I undressed, and blowing out the last lamp, I crawled into my bunk between the blankets.

CHAPTER THREE

Feminine Complications

WAKE up, Wayne, old boy, the day's busted an' what we gotta do is aplenty."

This was Lowden's cheery voice and it roused me almost instantly. I sat up and threw the blankets back. A bright sun was flooding through the window and the keen, cool air had that sweet, strange tang that I could not get used to. Shaw was pulling on his boots with considerable effort.

"Dawggone-it," he muttered. "I've gotta have some socks an' another pair of boots."

Lowden in his stocking feet was in the act of awakening Darnell and he was pretty gentle and quiet about it. I jumped out and hastily threw on my clothes.

"Jack," spoke up Shaw, "'spose you rustle out an' fetch some hot water. You an' me gotta shave."

"I'll fetch the water, Jack," I said, and hurried out. In the kitchen I was given a metal pitcher so hot I could hardly hold it. When I returned to my room the cowboys were all up and two of them smoking cigarettes. Darnell sat on his bunk. He said good morning to me and inquired if I might have an extra shirt to lend him.

"I surely have, and socks, too," I replied, and hastened to open my bag to procure them.

"Say, pard, I could use one of them shirts, too," spoke up Lowden in cheerful brazenness.

"You're welcome, Jack. And here's a pair of socks for you too, Vance," I replied.

"Jack, it's just dawned on my mind thet we cain't go out on thet construction job without boots an' gloves an' a lot of things," observed Shaw.

"Yo're shore bright all of a sudden," replied Jack. "I've knowed thet ever since we got hyar. How much money hev we got?"

"I've been scared to look."

"Fellows, I've some money left," I spoke up. "Not a great deal, but it ought to be enough to stake us until we get some wages."

"Wayne, you shore hev one cowboy characteristic," said Lowden. "An' I'll bet my spurs thet it won't be long till you get some more."

I dug down in my coat, and taking out my wallet, I divided my money equally among the four of us. Whereupon they went about their ablutions and in a few moments they were clean-shaven and presented a vastly better appearance. I would not have known Darnell to be the same person.

After breakfast we made our way outside. Hailing the driver of one of the big wagons, we asked him about a ride out to the work camp.

"Boys, if you're looking for jobs you better see Creighton here. He's in town and rarin' as usual."

"Where will we find Mr. Creighton?" I asked.

"I seen him just now in that big merchandise store."

I led the way to the store with my companions trailing behind me, and looked eagerly around for Mr. Creighton. In the back of the store several men were talking. I recognized one of them as Mr. Williamson. He shook hands with me.

"Glad to see you, Cameron. We've been looking for you. Creighton, let

me introduce the young New Englander, Cameron, about whom I spoke to you."

I turned from him to confront a stalwart man, still young, with a leonine head and flashing eyes. Judged by his garb he might have been a miner. His grip was strong and rough as he greeted me.

"How do you do, Cameron," he said. "Williamson has recommended you, and judging by what I've heard, you couldn't have a better recommendation. Are these boys with you?" Mr. Creighton continued.

"Yes, sir. Looking for a job, the same as I am."

"Come inside, all of you," he returned, and excusing himself to Williamson and the other men, he led us into a small room that was evidently an office. "Cameron," he continued, turning to me, "Williamson says you were part way toward becoming a doctor before you left Harvard. That's good. I haven't a man in my outfit who has any technique of medicine or surgery. And you bet we'll need the last. You're hired. Now let us meet these boys you have with you. Cowboys, if I know my West. Call them here one at a time."

I beckoned to Shaw standing just outside the door and he came in with his slow musical step. I introduced him.

"Glad to meet you, Shaw, and I hope I can use you. What can you do that would be of value to a hard-pressed construction boss?"

"Reckon no work atall thet would be the regular line of yore laborers," returned Shaw easily.

"Have you been a plainsman?"

"Born on a hoss. Used to ranges all my life. Handled cattle every way. I know the buffalo. Reckon I'd be valuable in the tight places yore outfit will meet."

"Have you fought Indians?"

"Yes. Ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. I take it, Mr. Creighton, thet my value to yore outfit would be as scout an' hunter. In particular, the way I figure yore work, I'd know where to find timber."

"Ha! Timber? You mean for telegraph poles? You hit me square in the midriff. You're hired. We'll talk wages later. Call in your friends."

In another moment the sturdy little bowlegged Lowden entered with his clinking step and following him, the erect, dark-faced Darnell.

"What can you do?" Creighton asked of Lowden.

"I'm used to ridin' with Shaw an' thet's the job I'd like. Handy with a gun. Outside of thet I reckon I'm no good."

"Well," returned Creighton with a laugh, "you're hired. And now," he turned to Darnell, "tell me why I'm not going to build this Western Union telegraph line without you."

"Mr. Creighton, I reckon I need not tell you any more than this," replied Darnell earnestly. "I have jest ridden east over the Oregon Trail. I know the Sweetwater Valley, the South Pass country, an' the high range on toward Bridger, as well as any rider in Wyomin'. As a range man I figger that your worst job will come along between Julesburg an' the Sweetwater River an' westward up to South Pass."

"What do you mean—my worst job?" inquired Creighton.

"Indians. They won't take kindly to this work. The Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes, and probably other hos-

tile tribes will make hell on earth for your outfit."

"You're on, too," returned this man we suddenly knew as our boss, his teeth clicking. "All of you, hunt up Ben Liligh, my foreman. He's in town somewhere, I think at the blacksmith's shop. He's got an empty wagon that will be just the thing for you boys. You'll go with my wagon train directly on the line of the construction work. Cameron, I have a couple of medical kits in my wagon and you can take charge of them. I'll expect you all on the job in the morning."

Whereupon Creighton left us. We went to hunt for Liligh.

"Wal, we're lucky," said Shaw. "It calls for a drink. What say, Wayne?"

"I guess one might steady me a little," I replied. We went in the nearest saloon and had our drink and then, returning to the street, we made tracks for the blacksmith's shop.

As we approached, I noticed a little wiry man, gray-faced and gray-haired, coming from one of the wagons. He wore a soiled buckskin shirt, fringed and beaded, and that made him stand apart from the laborers we had seen. His old slouch hat was cocked on one side of his head and he was smoking a pipe.

"We have been sent by Mr. Creighton to report to his foreman, Liligh," I announced.

"I'm Liligh," he replied in a dry crisp voice, as he removed his pipe. "What'cha reportin' to me about?"

I burst out into hurried explanation.

"Ahuh. So thet's it. Wal, I reckon there ain't no help fer it. I've already hed hell'n' damnation with every kind of workman on this hyar damn job, but I haven't tried a Yank yet, an' sure, no cowboys."

"All we want is a chance to make good," I said curtly.

Shaw drawled in cool easy insolence, "Say, Mista Liligh, ain't thet scar above yore ear a mark of where some Injun tried to lift yore hair?"

The old frontiersman yelled angrily, "Yer damn right, cowboy, an' I'll say yer eyes are purty sharp."

"Wal, old timer, if you had me an' my pard with you when thet happened, like as not you wouldn't have got it."

"Ho, ho! Indian fighters, heh?" Liligh retorted, yet his keen scrutiny took second and more shrewd stock of the cowboy. "Yu sound like business. Come over hyar an' see yer wagon. It's sich a damn good wagon that I wanted it myself. It was built to float like a boat. Yu can lift it off the wheels an' pack yer load across a river. The wheels air made of Osage orange an' white oak an' oughta last forever. The galoots who hed this wagon stole everything but the bunks an' the blankets. Yu'll hev to hev a complete new outfit."

"Will we have to pack grub an' do our own cooking?" asked Shaw.

"No. Not with Creighton's wagon train. We hev a good cook. Yu can pick out yer bunks an' put yer personal belongin's under each one, an' then go to the store an' get the things yu need an' charge to Creighton. Rifles an' plenty of shells, plenty of shells fer yer six-guns, workin' outfits of clothes, an' don't fergit some warm, heavy things. But fust, is any one of yu a teamster?"

"Boss, that drivin' will be my job," spoke up Darnell. "I've done a lot of freightin'. Hosses or mules—it makes

no difference to me."

"All right. We're gettin' somewhere," returned Liligh. "Take down this list an' pack the stuff over hyar. An' yer private possessions, if yu hev any. Fix up the wagon to suit yerselves an' make it comfortable. Tools, buckets, basins, towels and soap, plenty of bandages, canvas water bags, an extra blanket apiece, an' I reckon thet oughta be all 'cept what yu wanta buy on yer own hook."

We hurried over to the merchandise store to get the things Liligh had told us to order. My comrades insisted that the first thing to do was to fit me to a rifle and gun belt and gun.

The parcel of shells they bought for me was about as heavy a load as I ever carried. While the boys went on selecting more rifles and ammunition I got another clerk and proceeded to buy a list of things I thought I'd need. When this was done, I told the boys I would go to the tavern and pack my belongings and take them down to our wagon.

Half a block down toward my tavern, I came to another store which I had not noticed. As I was about to pass, a slim young girl, bareheaded, came out and accosted me. She had auburn hair, dark-blue eyes, and her white face, despite being a little too thin, was very attractive.

"You appear to know me, Miss."

"I am Ruby. You saw me at Red Pierce's."

"Oh!" I replied in surprise. "You look so—so different this morning—and younger. How did you know my name?"

"I know all about you," she said with a smile. "Facts and gossip travel fast out here. When you slugged Hand Radford, I was so glad I—I wanted to meet you."

"Then you are not his girl?" I asked, gazing hard at her.

"I am any man's girl—that is, so far as dancing and drinking and all the rest of my job is concerned," she said bitterly, "but I hate some of these men and that Radford is mean. He's brutal and he thinks he owns me. He's 'most as bad as the man I work for."

"Who is that?" I queried.

"Red Pierce, who runs the saloon and gambling-hall."

"Ruby, aren't you very young?"

"I'm sixteen but I feel as old as the hills."

"How long have you been on this job?"

"Only a few months, but they seem like years."

"Where's your home?"

"I haven't any," she replied.

"Oh, that's too bad. Haven't you parents—relatives?"

"I had, not so long ago," she returned mournfully. "They were all killed in the massacre of Scot's Wagon Train. Didn't you hear about that? The Cheyennes attacked us outside of Grand Island. I was one of the few rescued by soldiers."

"No, I hadn't heard of it. I am very sorry indeed. You don't talk like the regular Westerners."

"I'm from Iowa. We moved there from Illinois, where I was born and went to school."

"Well," I asked, "how did you ever get into Red Pierce's saloon?"

"I just fell into it. I was hungry and had no place to go."

"Do you intend to stay there?"

"No longer than I have to."

"What do you mean by that? Does Red Pierce have some hold on you?"

"He beats me. If we were alone now in my room I could show you how bad."

"No, I'll take your word for it," I responded hastily.

"Pierce would beat me again if he found out I told you," she said earnestly. "He'd kill any man who tried to take me away from him. He's already killed one man."

"Well," I replied, "I don't know much about shooting and less about killing, being a tenderfoot, but you've met my friends Vance Shaw and Lowden."

"Vance—he's really grand!"

"I don't mind telling you that Shaw said he liked you better than a man should and that if Pierce made any trouble while he was dancing with you he'd probably kill him."

"I saw Shaw early last night on the street and he wouldn't even look at me," she replied hotly. "If he likes me as well as you say he does, why doesn't he go after Pierce!"

"I don't know, Ruby," I returned. "It certainly isn't from fear—that cowboy is not afraid of anyone."

"Anyway—and don't tell him—I'm in love with him."

"Ruby," I interposed hastily, "please don't say any more. I must hurry about my work now, but before I go please tell me some more about this man Pierce."

"He's a bad man, and has some bad partners," she said quickly. "One of them, Black Thornton, is his right-hand man. He's the one that shot at your foot. The third man I didn't know. Pierce is running a saloon and a gambling-hall, but I suspect that he and his men have some other irons in the fire. They're in some kind of shady business. From what I hear, they're going to move west with the telegraph line as far as South Pass. And they have big plans for that gold diggings."

"Thanks, Ruby, for telling me all this," I replied. "Unless I miss my guess, you're going to see four friends at the dance hall to-night. Good-by till then." I strode toward the tavern.

I had my packing about finished when Darnell came in, knocking his jingling spurs against the floor. He said, "I reckoned I had better come back an' help you pack your bags to the wagon."

I said, "Much obliged, pard. These bags are pretty heavy. Did you get all the stuff?"

"Yes, an' already at the wagon. I had time to hunt up Liligh an' take a look at our oxen."

"I remember now, you're going to drive us. Shaw and Lowden will, of course, ride their horses. That leaves me to ride with you, doesn't it?"

"It shore does. On the front seat with a rifle acrost your knees, practicin' shootin' at jackrabbits, so you can get good enough to hit Injuns ridin' their ponies like mad an' shootin' at us from under their hosses' necks. Take a hunch from me. That won't be very long."

"Grab that bag, Darnell," I said. "Take a look and see if the fellows left anything here, and come along after me. I'll go pay the bill."

Upon leaving the tavern, Darnell led down an alley to a back street, which was really the open plain, and from there we made directly to the blacksmith's shop. I found the wagon much more attractive than when I had first seen it.

Inside they had put some boxes up back of the driver's seat on each side

self sitting on my bunk with the three cowboys across from me. "Listen, boys, when I left you a while back to go uptown, I ran into the little dance-hall girl, Ruby."

I went on to tell the boys Ruby's story and at the end of my recital I found myself vaguely suggesting that we do something about her.

Jack Lowden was the first to speak. "Two days on the frontier an' you break out gonna rescue a dance-hall girl! Gonna brace a tough outfit an' git the hell shot out of you! Dawg-gone! Now I'm wonderin' what the hell you'll do when you grow out of bein' a tenderfoot."

Shaw blew a great cloud of smoke out of which he drawled, "Fellers, I knowed he'd pull some trick like thet. Let's go have a drink an' then eat on it."

We climbed down out of the wagon and started for the street with Darnell and Lowden somewhat in advance. I took Shaw's arm and held him back until quite a little distance separated us from the other couple. "Listen, Vance, I didn't tell you all," I broke out hurriedly. "I couldn't give Ruby away in front of our pards until you knew. The poor kid is in love with you, Vance!"

"How'd you know thet?"

"I guessed it from her talk even before she confessed it."

"Pard, did it occur to you thet these gold-diggin' dance-hall girls are as slick as hell?"

"I humbly admit to being a tenderfoot, Vance, but I am no fool in regard to human nature. Pierce may have forced her to be a gold-digger, but to *me*, she was honest."

"Aw, hell, I figured thet myself," drawled Shaw, flinging his cigarette aside. The action was swift and passionate. "I just knowed all the time thet I'd have to shoot the daylights out of thet Red Pierce. But let's go eat first."

Chapter Four

Like Falling Off a Log

WHAT plans Shaw was formulating, if any, to get Ruby away from the dance hall, I did not know. But I was determined that she must leave.

I had split up my money among the four of us and my share was not enough to send her East on the stagecoach and keep her for any length of time until she found a home. Out here the only safe place I knew for Ruby was with the four of us. But how could a girl ride West in a covered wagon with three wild cowboys and a tenderfoot engaged in building a telegraph line?

The four of us were lined up in a row of seats before the counter of a dingy little restaurant. Vance was sitting next to me. The other boys did all the talking. Vance had not spoken at all since he had made that cool biting assertion about shooting the daylights out of Red Pierce, which I was surprised to find had not shocked me at all. I would have liked to do it myself.

When the Chinaman placed our supper before us, conversation ceased, and all fell to heartily except myself. I had been hungry but now I was not. I fussed with my food and made pretense of eating and finally did drink half a cup of coffee.

Upon going out into the street

again, I found it was dusk and the usual bustle had quieted down. We walked up the street as far as the tavern.

"Fellers," spoke up Shaw, "spread out and listen for a while. I want to find out what's goin' on."

With that we separated and I made my way to the tavern fireplace. Presently I left the proximity of the hot fire and sat down on a long bench which was occupied by two other men talking to one standing.

"Pierce left on the afternoon stage for Omaha," said the man standing. "He can't get back for some time and the cattle deal we had in mind is out for the present."

"Bartlett, I never had any faith in Pierce's buying cattle," returned one of my neighbors on the bench.

"He could afford it because he's raking in the coin in that joint of his," replied the man addressed as Bartlett.

"But what would he do with a big bunch of cattle?"

"Well, he could do the same as we want to do," returned the first speaker. "Cattle prices are going up. Pierce's plan, I understood, was to travel along with the telegraph line, living off the construction workers until he gets to western Wyoming. As long as he is going by slow stages, it would be easy to take a herd of cattle with him and sell out for big money out there on the Sweetwater."

"It's the coming cattle country, I tell you," exclaimed one of the others. "I can figure Pierce rustling cattle but that's all."

"Well, let's wait till Pierce comes back. We don't care who or what he is, as long as he pays cash."

"Right," assented the first. "Let's go have a drink on it."

My immediate impulse was to hurry in search of Shaw; then I thought there was no hurry about his learning Pierce was gone. I kept my seat, gazing into the fire and occasionally glancing around.

Presently along came Darnell and, espying me, seated himself beside me. "Howdy, pard," he said cheerfully. "I've been watchin' you from back there an' you 'peared to be more interested in dreamin' over that fire than seein' what's goin' on."

"I was, for the moment," I replied, with a laugh. "But I'll bet you two bits I've got more news for Vance than you have."

"Gosh, you're a bettin' feller. Here comes Shaw and Lowden, probably lookin' for us."

I lost no time imparting the news of Pierce's departure.

"Wal, pards, I reckon we have to go see Ruby anyhow," spoke up Vance casually.

We left the tavern and made our way toward the bright yellow flare which indicated Pierce's gambling-hall. Shaw strode ahead and as Tom and Jack dropped behind, I hastened to catch up with the tall cowboy.

"Vance," I said, "now would be a good time to get Ruby away."

"Hell's fire, Wayne. I seen thet as soon as you told me Pierce was gone," Shaw snapped. "You stick close to me an' keep yore eyes peeled. Pierce is away but the town is full of ugly fellers. Pierce has friends. Anythin' can happen."

which would do very well as cupboards. A small mirror had been hung over each one. The two bunks on each side had been moved back a little and in front of them had been placed a box for a seat. Upon one improvised bureau was a lamp with a shade. The blankets and articles were distributed upon the four bunks. In the back were the buckets, basins, and other things, and a movable stairway with three steps led from the wagon to the ground.

By this time it was getting along well in the afternoon. Shaw and Lowden went back to the store to make some final purchases. While we were waiting for the boys to return, Darnell told me that just aiming a rifle was as good practice as actual shooting.

"Take a fly on the tent or wagon cover, for example," Darnell advised. "Follow him with the bead when he crawls. Then freeze on him and squeeze the trigger."

Presently I heard the loud creaking of wagon wheels.

"Here comes Liligh," said Darnell.

"Boys, it ain't all bad news," Liligh greeted us. "The boss says yu don't need to hurry out to the line tomorrow. Take it easy an' go along with me. We got as far west today as we had telegraph poles. An' then we dug post holes all the way almost to this burg. This is the fust time thet Creighton has been held up. He expected two wagon trains of poles today but they didn't come."

"Held up?" I repeated reflectively. I thought, *How will it be with him when we get out on the plains where there aren't any poles?* and I voiced that query to Liligh.

"What'll the boss do?" cracked Liligh. "Hell, he'll make us git telegraph poles where there ain't any. Cameron, how did yu fellers git along with yer wagon?"

"Come and see."

Liligh inspected our wagon. "Wal, where yu gonna put the clothes press an' the pianer?"

"We'll have to dispense with those, Liligh," I replied with a smile.

"Thet's the all-firedest, nicest fixed-up wagon we hev."

At this juncture Shaw and Lowden returned laden with bundles and packs which they dropped with relief at the tail of our wagon.

"Boss," spoke up Darnell, "how about a small barrel or keg to fasten outside the wagon?"

"What'cha want thet fer?" asked the boss. "Do yu wanta carry thet full of rum?"

"Say, Liligh, we'll want it for water," returned Darnell. "There are stretches between here and the Sweetwater where you gotta make dry camp."

"So I've heared about nine million times," replied Liligh testily, "but thanks fer yer idee. We'll put small water barrels on all the wagons." He spat tobacco juice at a stone a good ten feet away and he hit it. Then he fixed his narrow slits of eyes upon Shaw and looked him up and down again. "Shaw, did you run again anybody in perticlar up town?" he queried.

"Cain't say thet I did, Boss."

"Wal, where were yer eyes? Ain't yu one of them Texans thet's always lookin' fer some man?"

"Not any more. I quit lookin' way down on the other side of the Red River."

"Thet's good fer yu an' probably

not so good fer him. Now all yu gotta watch out fer is someone lookin' fer yu. Hev yu ever heared of Joe Slade?"

"Who in the hell is Joe Slade? The *name* sounds kinda tough."

"Wal, he's a killer all right. He's got about a dozen men to his credit or discredit already. I'm tippin' yu off, Shaw, an' yer pard, too, not to step on Slade's toes or in any way excite his queer nature."

"Thanks for the advice, Liligh," returned Shaw.

"Slade rolled in this afternoon with sixteen wagons," went on Liligh. "He's been workin' fer the Overland Company. Some kind of official job or other an' I heard him say thet he wanted to git on this Western Union job. I'll bet he wants to git on all right, but not fer any job. Wal, I've got to go back to the wagons an' show Smitty about the repairs to be made."

I was quick to see the glance exchanged between Shaw and Lowden. "Pard, what the hell you make of thet?" queried Lowden testily.

"Damned if I know, Jack," drawled Shaw, "an' I care less. But I reckon Liligh has run into somebody from Texas who knows me."

After a while I said, "Boys, it's getting along late and I'm as hungry as a bear. What do you say to unpacking this stuff you just brought, stow it away in the wagon, and then go eat?"

"Jest dandy," agreed Lowden, with his cheerful grin. "An' thet reminds me, pards, who'n hell is gonna be the boss of our outfit?"

"Thet's right, Jack, who? We cain't all be bosses."

"If that is necessary, of course you should be the leader," I said, designating Shaw.

"Me? Why the hell me?" protested Shaw.

"You just seem to be the leader, that's all."

"He means you jest talk all the time," Lowden put in.

"Nix. I tell you what we'll do—we'll cut the cairds," replied Shaw, ignoring Lowden's sally.

Shaw produced a dingy pack of cards and squatting, he began to shuffle with remarkable dexterity. "Set down, pards. Now you cut the cairds, pard— There. You pull the fust caird, Cameron."

"Why me? I shouldn't be included. I'm a tenderfoot. I wouldn't know what to do."

"Ump-umm. Well, you gotta draw anyhow," returned Vance.

I carefully drew a card from the inside of the pack and turning it over found it to be an ace. Shaw drew a deuce, Darnell got a jack, and Lowden a ten spot.

"Wal, that's settled," said Lowden. "Cameron, yo're the boss of our quartet, an' it's a damn good thing. We know what's comin' an' you can decide things fairly after siftin' over our advice."

So there I suddenly found myself, elected leader over our little unit, and I was both thrilled and frightened. As I fought to overcome emotion with reason, my talk with the dance-hall girl, Ruby, returned vividly to mind and I knew I must somehow broach that subject to Shaw as quickly as possible. But when I told him I had something to discuss with him he called the boys.

"Wayne has somethin' he wants to say."

In a short while then, I found my-

When we entered Pierce's the roulette wheel was idle and there were only three gambling-games going on at the tables. In the rear of the hall, toward which we wended our way, two couples were dancing, and a number of men were sitting along the wall. There were two men standing talking to a girl whom I could not see plainly until she moved from behind the taller of the two. It was Ruby.

She was quick to see us reach the dance floor. She smiled and waved to us.

Vance had halted a step or two in front of me with Lowden on his right. Darnell was behind me. Instantly I sensed something in the air but I had no idea what it was.

"Vance, thet's the gazabo all right," whispered Lowden, "an' he don't look very tough to me, but you know how some fellers fool you."

"Shore, thet's him," drawled Shaw coolly, "an' he just had to be makin' up to Ruby. Wal, let's see if Ruby introduces us."

The individual Shaw had intimated was making up to Ruby was well dressed, a pleasant, mild-appearing man around 30. He had a smooth face, deep-set eyes, and a rather odd conformation of chin and lips that denoted the opposite of weakness. As Ruby spoke to him in a nervous, hasty manner, he turned to watch us slowly approach. It was then I observed he wore a gun belt from which new brass shells glittered, and the gun sheath swung at his right side under his coat, almost out of sight.

"Oh, here you are, boys," cried Ruby in a rather high-pitched, nervous voice.

"Evenin', Ruby," returned Shaw quietly, and the rest of us spoke to her, and removed our sombreros as Shaw had done.

"These—are my cowboy friends working for the Western Union," spoke up Ruby to the two men with her. "I want you to meet them. Boys, this is Mr. Joe Slade—and Mr. Hall. And my friends are Vance Shaw, Mr. Cameron—and—and——"

"Howdy, gents," drawled Vance. He took a slow step forward but he did not offer his hand. I could not see where Vance was looking because I was obsessed with the expression on Ruby's face and the fact that here we were, face to face with the notorious killer, Joe Slade.

I felt my mouth grow dry and my tongue tried to cling to the roof of my mouth. I broke out into a cold sweat. I watched Vance. He surveyed the group coolly.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Slade returned affably. "I have engaged Miss Ruby for the next dance."

"I reckon I savvied thet," said Shaw, quite matching Slade's pleasant voice and manner. "Shore, go ahaid. I don't mind my girl dancin' with gentlemen."

"Thanks for the compliment, Shaw," returned Slade. "Come, Ruby, I'm sure I'll enjoy the dance even if you are his girl."

Ruby had stood there like a lovely statue from the instant of Shaw's cool assertion of his claim on her. She was still staring at Vance when Slade put his arm around her and whirled her on to the floor. I heard Lowden say, "Pard, what'n'ell do you know about thet?"

"Jack, you can never tell about some fellers. Maybe Slade ain't a bad feller atall. An' you bet we cain't let

him go us one better in courtesy to a lady."

At that moment a hand touched my arm and a husky voice spoke at my elbow: "Hello, handsome. I'm Flo. Don't you want to dance with me?"

I turned abruptly to see one of the other girls standing beside me. She appeared about 20 years old. She was dressed in a gown which revealed much of her full body.

"Yes, thank you. I'd like to," I replied, and I was glad that I had exchanged my boots for a pair of shoes. In a moment I found myself whirling around that dance-hall floor with a girl whose business it was to be seductive to men.

Soon we circled close to Ruby and her partner and I watched them. Slade was making the best of his opportunities. I wondered how Vance was going to like seeing Ruby so obviously hugged, particularly after his courteous reception of Slade's request.

"Say, stranger, you may be a tenderfoot, but you're a darn good dancer," was my partner's first remark.

"Thanks for the compliment, Flo," I replied. "I'm glad somebody appreciates some of the Yankee in me."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Wayne Cameron. I'm from Boston and I came West to work on the telegraph lines."

"We don't have the luck to have many Easterners like you drift out here."

"By the way, I wonder if you know where Pierce is."

"Sure, he went to Omaha after some more girls. You see, his business is growing and he figures he can use more girls as he follows the construction gang. Say, don't you like me better than Ruby?"

I evaded the bald question by answering, "It's Shaw that likes Ruby—in fact, I think they like each other."

"Well, let me give you a tip. Pierce likes her too, and he doesn't like Shaw. I heard him say so. Shaw better watch his step."

After a couple more rounds of the hall, the dance ended and we came to a stop right where we had started. Before we joined the others, however, Flo buttonholed me and looked up with a bold glance.

"Wouldn't you like to come up to my room later?"

"Thanks, Flo," I replied, as easily as I could manage, "I—I—we've some particular work to do tonight." I reached in my pocket for some money and pressed it into her hand.

"You mean you're giving me this—without coming up to my room?"

"Forget it," I answered.

"It was a nice dance, Wayne. You're a prince."

As we joined the others I looked expectantly at Shaw who stood before Ruby and Slade. We exchanged commonplace remarks about the dance, and the girl, Flo, shot a battery from her eyes at Lowden with the remark, "Say, cowboy, I'd like to take you on next. Can you straighten out those bowlegs of yours enough to keep your spurs from tearing my stockings to pieces?"

"Lady, I kin dance rings around our Yankee friend," said Jack. "Shore I reckon my bowlegs ain't very handsome, but they kin hold a girl on my lap without lettin' her slip through."

"Well, you'll have to buy me a drink before I can risk myself with you, cowboy."

Slade faced Shaw with his pleasant, enigmatical smile. "Your girl is a grand dancer. Thanks for allowing me the privilege."

"Wal, yo're shore welcome," replied Shaw. "I never seen her beat an' I've danced with a lot of girls."

With that Slade bowed and went his way toward the bar where he was joined by the stockily built man I recognized as Black Thornton. Thornton flashed a meaning glance in our direction.

"Ruby, you look sort of fagged," said Shaw solicitously.

"I'm dead on my feet, Vance. I had hell with Pierce today before he left and I was just about ready to die."

"Aw, thet's too bad. Take me somewhere private. I've got lots to say to you," Shaw replied, looking casually around.

"Come to my room."

"Okay, thet'll be fine. Wayne, you tag along with us, an' Darnell, you keep yore eye on Jack. Keep him from drinkin' too much, an' thet means you'll have to get him away from thet girl."

Ruby led us out of the hall to a dark, narrow stairway. Shaw assisted her, and I groped after them. There was a dim light burning somewhere on the landing above, and my observation was that the upper story of that building had been a loft, partitioned off into rooms.

The room Ruby led us into proved to be, when Shaw lighted a lamp, almost as bare and comfortless as the rest of the quarters in Pierce's establishment. Shaw wasted no time in coming to the point of our visit.

"Ruby, I'm goin' to take you out of this place," he said as he rose from lighting the lamp and approached her.

"Oh!" gasped the girl. "Take me away? Oh, where—and how?"

"I don't know exactly where, but I'll show you how."

"Oh—how wonderful! But—what about when Pierce comes back—he'll never give me up."

"To hell with Pierce. We'll be out on the Trail before he comes back an' if he hunts you up, wal, thet'll be too bad for him."

"Oh! I—I don't know what to say," she whispered huskily. "Wayne has told you what I said? He was sorry for me. Is it that way with you? Are you going to send me back East? I've no home, no friends, no money. Or are you going to keep me as your girl?"

"Ruby, I'll marry you as soon as a parson comes along."

"You can't—you can't do that, Vance," she cried wildly. "I'm not—fit to be your wife."

"Say, girl, maybe I figured you wrong. Don't you love me?"

"I do—I do."

"Wal, thet makes it okay, for I fell turrible hard for you the minute I laid eyes on you."

Ruby fell against Vance and would have slid to her knees if he had not caught her. She looked up at him with amazement and worship that erased the havoc from her face.

"Pard," spoke up Shaw, "we gotta rustle out of here an' make up our minds what to do. Ruby, have you got any belongin's? Any clothes you would want to take?"

"I haven't very much," she replied. "A couple of plain dresses. When I was saved from the Indians, I had nothing but the clothes on my back. I have them still."

"And what are they?"

"A boy's blue-jean overalls, a blouse, an old slouch hat, and a pair of boots. I wore those on the wagon train."

"Good!" exclaimed the cowboy. "We can disguise you with thet outfit. I see here's yore bag. Now pack them things you want pronto, an' let's rustle out of here."

In a couple of moments more we were going down the stairs. Ruby showed us a back door that led from the hall to the rear of the building, and we were soon out under the starry sky in the cold night air. It was as easy as that. I carried Ruby's bag and Shaw helped the girl as we made our way along the rear of the buildings toward the lower part of town.

When we got back to our wagon, which stood some little distance from the blacksmith's shop, there was a dying campfire near, but not anyone in sight. The low hum of the town's revelry came to my ears.

"Strike a light, pard," said Vance, "an' hand down thet heavy coat I just bought. It's above my bunk—Here, Ruby, slip into this an' go sit by thet fire while Wayne an' I fix up a place for you."

He led her over to the smoldering fire and fixed a seat for her beside the red embers. Then he returned to me. We looked at each other in the starlight. His eyes were audacious and he let out his easy laugh, no doubt at the bewilderment in my face.

"Pard Wayne, you shore got me into one hell of a fix," he drawled. "What the hell will Jack an' Darnell say? What will thet old geezer foreman Lilligh say? An' what will Creighton *do?*"

"Lord only knows, Vance. I'm simply stumped. But if ever I did something I'm proud of, it's to help you save that girl. But what will we do now?"

"Pard, we're goin' to take Ruby with us," Shaw answered simply.

Chapter Five

News from Texas

SHORE, pard, I was only teasin' about you gettin' me in this fix. We'll shove all but one bunk an' a couple of them boxes back toward the rear an' fix up the front end for Ruby. I'll give her my bunk an' I'll sleep on the floor here at the end. There's some extra blankets an' a buffalo robe. Thet new tarp will come handy because we'll cut a piece off of it an' hang up a curtain between our quarters an' Ruby's."

In short order Shaw effected the needed changes, with what help I was able to give him. Then we joined Ruby and sat down by the glowing red embers. She watched the imperturbable cowboy, and so did I.

He rolled a cigarette and put it in his mouth. He lifted a red ember on a chip and lighted it.

"Listen, kid," presently he began, "it's goin' to work out fine. You haven't a thing to fear. Get it into yore little haid now—I'll take *care* of you. An' I'll bet a lot thet my pards will go the limit for me. We gotta disguise you. In the mawnin' you get into those boy's clothes. I used to know how to make a white boy look like a Mexican. I'll fix you up as dark as any Mexican ever was.

"I wouldn't have you cut them

pretty curls for all the Pierces an' all the bosses in the West. You'll have to gather them up an' hide them under yore slouch hat. I'll coach you on talkin' Mexican, which I can speak like a book. You'll stick pretty close to the wagon for a while except to get out a little at night after dark; an' when we have to tell anybody who you are, we'll say you are a poor Mexican orphan thet was throwed off from the last wagon train. What you think of thet, honey?"

"It's like a story," murmured Ruby.

"Pard Wayne, what do you think about it?"

"It's all right," I said, although I was a bit skeptical. I walked away out of earshot of the couple by the campfire and patrolled a beat along a line of trees at the edge of the prairie.

When I returned to the campfire, I found that Tom Darnell had come back from town and that Ruby had disappeared. I caught the last few words of Shaw's story about the girl and then he asked Darnell what he thought about it.

"Vance, I think what you're doin' for this girl is great. I'm all for you. I reckon we couldn't do any different."

"Wal," returned Shaw, "I'm shore grateful, Tom. Reckon we might as well turn in."

I spoke up and asked Tom where Lowden was.

"Aw, last I seen of him he was lookin' on red likker with that black-eyed dame."

"Wal, thet's Jack all over," replied Shaw. "We won't go back after him an' we won't wait up for him, but he'll catch hell if he gets drunk."

I took a few turns around the campfire. When I returned to the wagon, all was quiet. Shaw lay on the floor between the two bunks.

I softly sat on my bunk and this night, as a beginning, I did not remove anything but my shoes and my coat. The air was nipping cold and I felt that was a good excuse. I stretched out and covered myself with a blanket.

Something awakened me. It must have been near dawn. Some kind of noise around the wagon had broken my slumber. Before I heard it again I felt a pressure on my feet, and raising myself on my elbow I saw that Shaw was sitting up, his gun gleaming in the starlight. The pressure of his hand seemed to prompt me to silence. I saw him put the same cautious pressure upon Darnell. Then I heard shuffling footsteps outside.

Pulling me down, Shaw whispered in my ear, "It's thet damn geezer, Jack. I reckon he's half drunk. He's gonna try to sneak in the front of the wagon to keep from wakin' us."

"But he'll scare Ruby," I whispered back.

"Wal, she won't be so easy to scare. Let's wait. This is goin' to be funny."

Darnell also propped himself on his elbow, tense and alert of posture, which relaxed as he looked at us. No doubt he figured the situation just as Shaw had. I realized then, from the gray light that shone in the back of the wagon and made Darnell distinct, that the dawn was at hand.

Then I heard Jack trying to climb up on the wagon seat. Presently he got to the driver's seat and was nonplused to find the curtain that we had stretched behind it.

"By damn, wassa 'ells zis? Bet million—wrong wagon."

Just then Ruby awakened and let

out a scream. "Vance, Vance, wake up," she called. "There's a drunken bum trying to get in the wagon."

A gasping intake of breath, a sound of scraping boots, and a sodden thud as Lowden fell off acquainted us with the catastrophe that had befallen him.

"Shore, honey, we're all awake," spoke up Shaw. "We heard the drunken bum all right. It's Jack." Whereupon he leaped out of the wagon to the ground. "Come here," he bawled, and as he disappeared from my sight I heard Lowden utter an amazed snort. I decided to get out myself. I was in time to see Shaw collar the cowboy and give him a tremendous boot in the rear which landed Jack on all fours.

"My Gawd, pard, is it you? Or hev I got the willies?" called out Jack.

"There ain't nothin' the matter with you except yo're drunk," declared Shaw.

"Wot the hell? Wot kinda deal—up agin? If I ain't drunk or crazy, you got a woman in thet wagon."

"Shut up. Not so loud," ordered the cowboy peremptorily. "Shore we've got a woman here. It's Ruby an' she belongs to our outfit."

"Wal, I'll be damned! Gee, I reckoned I hed the jimjams. Sorry, pard, but how in hell was I to know?"

Shaw led him back to the wagon where Lowden presented a rather ludicrous and shamed figure. "Climb in, you no-good pard, an' get a little sleep. Boys, the day is about to bust but I reckon we can get another snooze."

I did not sleep any more. I saw the gray brighten, and day break in the east, and the ruddy sky grow suddenly resplendent with the rising sun. I slipped out of the wagon, carrying my boots and coat; and after putting them on, I proceeded to search for wood to make a fire. I packed back as heavy a load as I could carry. I found Darnell and Shaw up and about to leave the wagon on some errand.

"Ruby," called the cowboy, through the canvas, "are you awake?"

The answer came in a soft affirmative.

"You lay low in there until I come back," went on Shaw. "I'm goin' to get some stuff to make a Mexican out of you, an' we'll fetch back some grub too."

He and Darnell strode away then. I thought I had better awaken Lowden and get him up before the boys came back.

"Boss, what the hell come off last night?" he queried.

While he splashed and sputtered over a pan of water and brushed his tousled hair, I gave him a brief résumé of what had happened up to the present time.

"I don't mind pard Vance bootin' me so hard," he replied, ruefully, as he rubbed his rear, "but I shore ain't gonna stand fer bein' called a drunken bum. Last night I got the lowdown on Pierce an' his gang an' I couldn't hev been smart enough to do thet if I was drunk, could I?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Jack," spoke up Ruby, from within the wagon. "I apologize, but what in the world could I think? You plumped your feet right down on my bunk."

"Okay, Ruby, it's all right," replied Jack.

Presently Shaw and Darnell appeared, laden with bundles which they deposited on a piece of canvas.

"Mawnin', pard," Shaw said cheerfully to Lowden. "You fellers get breakfast while I fix up Ruby. Betcha two bits none of you will recognize her."

The fragrance of the ham and coffee was so appetizing that I quite forgot about the little drama within the wagon. But when Shaw called I was keen to look. He had gotten down out of the wagon and Ruby was in the act of following.

She was a slim boy in well-worn jeans and a dark jacket and an old gray slouched hat pulled down to hide her hair. That was contrast enough but her face was simply unrecognizable. It had been stained quite dark and it was my opinion that if she was supposed to be the counterpart of a Mexican youth, she was an attractive one.

She approached the campfire where several savory dishes had already been laid upon the tarpaulin. Lowden halted in the act of pouring the coffee and stared incredulously. Darnell stood motionless.

"Pards, meet our Mexican handy boy about camp," drawled Shaw. "He answers to the name Pedro." He sent her back to the wagon, saying that he would fetch her breakfast, whereupon we all fell to and ate heartily.

While we were finishing the meal more laborers attached to the wagons near by approached from town, and from their actions it was evident that there was work to do. The last man to appear was Liligh and he called to us:

"Good morning, cowboys. Rustle with yer grub, hitch up yer ox teams, an' git ready to follow me. Who's boss of yer wagon?"

"Wal, Liligh, we've got four bosses," called back Shaw, "but Cameron is the boss who'll say what goes."

Some hours later we drove eastward out of Gothenburg in our prairie schooner. I sat in the high driver's seat beside Darnell with Ruby on her knees behind us peeping out.

There were three wagons in front of us, the last of which was Liligh's. We were following in his wheel tracks just far enough back to escape the dust. The telegraph-pole holes had been dug all the way from the town back along the Trail to whereever Creighton had halted with his outfit. The wire had already been stretched along the ground and beside every hole was the insulator, the little green glass cup which was to hold the wire.

I saw that we were approaching nearer to the river, and after several miles, when we topped a slow gradual rise of ground, we saw stretches of water and sand running along a line of green willows which led my eager gaze to concentrate on a clump of white canvas wagons and grazing oxen, smoke, and dust that marked the construction camp. On each side stretched away the prairie, somehow beautiful in spite of the monotony of the rolling barren reaches.

At last, as we approached the camp, Shaw came forward to lean over my shoulder and survey the ground ahead. "About ten wagons," observed the cowboy. "Thet means Creighton's outfit, an' none of his other wagon trains are in."

"Look a little farther south, Vance," suggested Darnell; "you'll see a real big bunch of prairie schooners an' a lot of oxen an' horses. Thet's a big wagon train."

"Shore, I see it now. Thet's a regu-

lar trail wagon train in camp here."

"Wonder where Slade's wagon train is, that we heard about?" I commented.

"He had his wagons in town. Tom, drive a little off the road toward thet nice clump of willows, an' we'll make a stop there. Just a little outside of Creighton's camp, but not too far."

"Oh, Vance, what shall I do while we're here?" murmured Ruby, with a catch in her breath. "Shall I hide under my bunk?"

"I should smile not. All the same when there's men around you better make yourself a little scarce. Don't worry none, Pedro. We'll figure out things for you."

"Pard, I reckon one of us ought to hang around the wagon to keep Pedro company," suggested Lowden slyly.

"You bet, Jack," returned Shaw, who did not see the humor. "One of us must always be near her when it's possible."

We halted on the bank of the river near the green clump of willows, on the edge of a low bank beneath which the water ran clearly over white sand. Shaw suggested that I report to Creighton and find out what we had to do and that if I did not return promptly he would hunt me up.

I threw off my coat and after a moment's hesitation, unbuckled my gun belt and laid it on the ground too. I directed my footsteps toward the concentration wagons and when I reached them, I saw men at work on repairs, greasing wheels, and doing odd jobs I did not understand at the time.

I saw a wagon full of coils of telegraph wire and then over to one side a big vehicle different from the others which I at once recognized to be what Darnell called a chuck wagon. There were two fires still smoldering, around which a short, thick-set, jolly-faced man and a Negro helper were washing cooking utensils. Still farther over was a fine, big, white-canvas-covered wagon along the banks of the river where several men were seated around a table in the shade cast by the tall canvas dome.

As I approached I saw that one of the men seated by the table was Creighton and the others, except Liligh, were strangers. When I got up to them I bowed and spoke.

"Mr. Creighton, I am reporting for work. We have just arrived behind Liligh's wagon, and the cowboys are ready."

"Good day, Cameron," returned Creighton genially. "Sunderlund, this is Wayne Cameron, a young Easterner and Harvard man who has come West to help me build the telegraph line. Cameron, this is Jeff Sunderlund from Texas. He has a big wagon train bound for the Sweetwater Valley in Wyoming. He has a brother out there in the cattle business."

I greeted a fine-looking man who extended his hand and spoke with the identical accent I had learned to know and like in my intimacy with Shaw. He was light-haired and light-complexioned, though somewhat tanned, and he had penetrating, kindly blue eyes and a lined, strong, serious face to which a long, drooping, tawny mustache gave a dolorous touch. I was introduced to two other Texans, Bligh and Stevens, who were cattlemen associated with Sunderlund in the big wagon train and the herd of 4,000 cattle they were driving to Wyoming. The fourth man was

Lilligh, who spoke to me in his dry way.

"Cameron, pull up that box and have a drink with us."

"Thanks, don't mind if I do," I replied.

"Mr. Creighton has just told me about these cowboy men of yores," said Sunderlund, "an' I will be glad, especially, to meet the one who has just come from Wyomin'."

"You mean Darnell," I replied. "He is certainly an interesting chap. I'm sure he can tell you all you want to know about the Sweetwater Valley."

"Thet'll shore be good," rejoined the Texan.

"Mr. Creighton, are we stuck here?" I inquired earnestly.

"Stuck! Not by a damn sight," returned our leader grimly. "One of my scouts reported this morning that my brother James was on the way in with six wagonloads of telegraph poles. Then there's a wagon train of supplies due from Omaha. I expect my brother John with his wagon train in from the north in a few days. And the other wagon trains that have been hunting for poles will follow and catch up with us sooner or later. We'll have the line up as far as Gothenburg sometime early tonight."

"That's just splendid news!" I ejaculated happily. "I want to get out of that town. I've already had one fight and if I don't watch out I'm likely to have another."

"Cameron, you'll have fights everywhere and the big one will be out in the open," said Creighton, with a smile that minimized his assertion. "We've struck a bad delay here but we will go ahead with my outfit and my brother's load of poles, and leave some men behind to repair the damage done to the Western Union line by the cattle herd belonging to our southern guest here."

"Damage! How was that?" I exclaimed.

"Cameron, it's the silliest thing to happen," said Sunderlund in great annoyance. "My herd had stampeded, but they knocked over miles of the telegraph poles just by rubbin' their backs against them!"

"Can you beat that?" queried Creighton.

I glanced across the space between the wagons and saw Shaw approaching with his erect stride and forceful presence. Sunderlund's back was turned to the cowboy and he did not look over his shoulder until Shaw had approached within a few paces. Then, uttering an exclamation, he arose to his feet in haste. Shaw halted in his tracks, his clear eyes registering the fact that he was never to be surprised. Then the Southerner spoke out in a hearty voice, just a little too deep to be casual: "*Vance!* If it isn't you, I reckon I have gone loco."

"Wal, you old son-of-a-gun!" ejaculated Shaw, without his drawl. Suddenly his face glowed. "Colonel, I'm most damn glad to meet you here an' not a little surprised."

"Same here, cowboy."

They strode the few intervening steps and met with strong clasp of hands.

"How come I meet *you* way up here, old-timer?" queried Shaw.

"I've got a wagon train out here, an' a big herd of longhorns. Two partners who shore know you if you don't know them. Tom Bligh and Jim Stevens from the lower Brazos. We're on our way to Wyomin'."

"Wyomin'," echoed Shaw tensely.

"Got yore family with you?"

"Yes. Vance, I've got good news for you. You rode away too soon. After you left, it all came out about Stanley. Yore killin' him, instead of bein' a crime, turned out to be a good thing for the community. He lived a double life an' was the haid of one of the toughest gang of thieves the border ever knew. You have been absolutely cleared."

"Dawggone! Things do come about. I'm glad. My pard Jack will be happy to hear this. Colonel, did *all* yore family come north?"

"Yes, cowboy. Even Kit came along. She didn't marry Bert Knowles after all. She'll be mighty glad to see you. Kit's spunky, you know, but I imagine she's game enough to tell you an' take her medicine."

"Ah-huh. Wal, wal—I don't know. Things can happen to me, too, Colonel. Now, about yore goin' to Wyomin'. Where to?"

"Sweetwater Valley, Vance. Do you know anythin' about thet country?"

"I've heard plenty," returned the cowboy darkly. "There's a Jim Sunderlund out there, an' I'll gamble he's yore brother."

"Indeed he is, Vance. I've heard from him twice the last year, but not these last few months. He says the Sweetwater is the finest range in the West an' if I can drive a good herd in there, we'll get rich in no time. I've a half interest in his range. If you know anythin' about the Sweetwater, spill it pronto."

"Wal, Colonel, I'm sorry to say I've heard there's hell to pay out there," returned Shaw soberly. "A bad war is comin' pronto between the cattlemen an' the cowboys."

"War!" ejaculated Sunderlund. "Between cattlemen an' cowboys! Man, what's it all about?"

"Wal, it's the damnedest cattle deal I ever heard."

"Shore it must be. What kind of a deal?"

"Wal, it's one thet'll be new even for Texas." Vance hesitated, then: "Colonel, you ain't goin' to turn back, an' what I've heard is still only hearsay."

"Shore, you're right, Vance. I'll not cross bridges until I get to them. Say, what'll you take to go with me? I'll pay you anythin'. Give you a half interest in my Texas longhorns. Four thousand haid in the herd! An' Kit would sure be glad."

"Sorry, old-timer, I cain't take you up. I've made a deal to work for Mr. Creighton, an' me an' my pard Lowden have throwed in with Cameron here an' a Wyomin' cowboy named Darnell. It was from him thet I learned about the Sweetwater deal."

"Vance, I want to talk to thet young man. Will you fetch him to see me?"

"I will, Colonel." Shaw bowed to Creighton and me and the others present as if to make excuses for the situation and hurried away along the river bank.

"Sunderlund, who is this young cowboy, Shaw?" queried Creighton, keenly interested.

"Vance Shaw? Wal, I couldn't tell you in a week all about him. His

father was robbed an' murdered yeahs ago by rustlers. Vance belonged to the Texas Rangers for a while. He rode for me for three years. He killed my bitterest enemy. He fought the Comanches on my range, an' his outfit saved all our lives."

"Well, indeed Shaw is an acquisition to my construction work," said Creighton. Presently he suggested to me that I walk to the rise of ground about opposite his camp and see if I could get a glimpse of his brother James's wagon train.

As I strode along through the coarse grass, I mulled over all that I had heard. Prominent in my mind was the fact that Vance Shaw had turned out to be a most remarkable fellow with whom to become friends. It had hardly been news to hear of his being what the Texans called a gunman, but Sunderlund's eulogy made Shaw great. But what would happen when Shaw met this Kit Sunderlund again? No matter what the relation had been between Vance and Kit Sunderlund, I was positive that he would not desert Ruby.

Meanwhile my rapid stride had carried me almost to the rise of ground to the right of Sunderlund's wagon train and from its summit I had unobstructed gaze down the valley. I saw a large group of prairie schooners, drawn in a great circle, and all around it the prairie was spotted by grazing oxen and horses.

Down along the river road, far beyond the camp, I made out a line of telegraph poles standing stiff and erect, connected by a thread of wire that shone in the sun. Then came the point where the poles were down, some flat on the ground and others in various stages of leaning, until still farther on I could dimly make out that all the telegraph poles were down. And at the limit of my sight I saw what I concluded was a gang of men at work probably repairing the line. Then swinging my gaze around to the south I was tremendously thrilled to find a wagon train of eight wagons, only one of them covered with canvas, winding along like a huge snake. They were loaded to capacity with telegraph poles, the ends of which stuck out from the wagons. I hurried back to camp to break the good news to Creighton.

His face lighted up into a beaming smile. He thanked me and said he would put the gang to work raising poles the moment they arrived. Whereupon I made my way through the camp toward our wagon by the river. I found Ruby and Lowden sitting in the shade peeling potatoes in preparation for our supper.

"Where in the hell you been, Boss?" queried Lowden. "I been a-wonderin' about you. I seen you an' Shaw with them men over there, an' when Vance come back after Darnell an' dragged him off without as much as a word to me, I thought it was funny. Who the hell was thet tall geezer Shaw was talkin' to?"

"A Colonel Sunderlund, Jack. Vance has a good deal to tell you."

Jack swore in astonishment. "Sunderlund, eh? You bet Vance'll have a lot to say, Wayne."

"Jack, Colonel Sunderlund's news was good, from what I could make of it."

"You mean thet ruckus in Brownsville? The truth come out?" Jack asked earnestly.

"It certainly did, and all to Vance's credit."

"Wal, the old son-of-a-gun. He might have taken a couple minutes to tell me after I've ridden a thousand miles with him, half-starved, half-drowned, shot at a dozen times. Did—did Sunderlund bring his family—his womenfolk?" Lowden asked, his piercing eyes intent upon me.

"Why, yes, I believe he did," I replied.

"An' Vance knew this?"

"He and Sunderlund mentioned a girl named Kit—"

"Aw, I knowed it," Jack exclaimed. "Thet feller just cain't keep away from trouble. Supposin' she should find out about Ruby, which is shore inevitable sooner or later? Wow!"

Chapter Six

Prairie Peril

IN less than an hour Creighton with his wagon and several others were headed back for town. Presently our vehicle was the first to follow the wagon train of James Creighton as wagons rolled out along the telegraph line westward toward town. Men on the last wagon, whenever they came to a post hole in the ground, threw off a telegraph pole.

Soon, under Liligh's direction, we were engaged in strenuous labor. There were four groups of laborers carefully raising the poles and easing them down into the holes in the ground. We filled in the earth and tamped them down tight. Darnell drove our wagon. Ruby stayed out of sight. We had a stalwart companion from Liligh's outfit to make up our quartet. His name was Sullivan and he was a jolly Irishman.

Despite the strenuous toil, the afternoon passed by quickly and before dark we erected the last pole just outside of town. We decided to make camp right there.

While we were eating supper a messenger called on us to notify us that the construction camp would be held up on the following day to permit Sunderlund's wagon train and herd of cattle to get ahead of us.

"Aw, hell," growled Lowden, "we jest cain't get away from this burg without trouble."

Darnell said that the telegraph line would probably keep up with the wagon train, that Sunderlund, with all those wagons and cattle, couldn't average more than five or six miles a day.

After dark I paced to and fro a bit to try to ease my aching muscles, and succeeded to some extent. Vance and Ruby wandered off toward the river which was close by, and I was left to myself. Soon I sought my bunk.

The sun was high and shining in my face when Darnell gently shook me and told me to get up for breakfast.

"That's easy to ask, Tom, but how on earth am I going to do it?" I replied, with a groan. Still, after washing and limping around a bit, I began to feel better.

At breakfast Shaw asked his comrades, "What the hell makes you gazabos so glum this mawnin'?"

After hesitating and halting, Lowden replied, "Cain't you send Rub—Pedro off somewhere to look at the scenery?"

"Wal, I could, but I won't. Ruby is in this deal with us now. She's game,

an' you might just as well speak out before her."

"Okay. It's about Slade. We shore hed him figgered correct. He's all right sober, but he's one of these bloody hombres who, when he gits to drinkin', sees red an' has to spill red all over the landscape. He's killed one of his drivers yestiddy, an' from what I heared he killed the man without any reason atall, 'cept his ornery disposition. Shore, one killin' like thet don't make any difference to us one way or the other, but what made me an' Tom sore was thet Slade had been heared to make a dirty crack about Ruby."

"I told you-all what a funny feeling I had when I seen thet hombre Slade makin' up to Ruby," observed Shaw in his slow, pondering way.

"Wal, pard," went on Lowden, "we got the day on our hands an' let's go to town soon an' get it over. I went in Pierce's dive last night an' asked fer Ruby. Somebody said she had disappeared, but I got ahold of Flo an' she said Ruby was sick, an' she winked at me when she said it. She's wise an' she's not gonna give us away."

"Shaw, if it's jest the same to you, I'll stay in camp," said Darnell moodily.

"I don't know about thet, pard," returned Shaw thoughtfully. "I reckon you better come along. Ruby can keep out of sight in the wagon, an' we won't be gone long."

"We'll split up an' Jack will trail with me," said Shaw, once we reached Gothenburg's dusty thoroughfare. "Tom, you an' Wayne go into the saloons an' stores—every place—an' if you see Slade tell him thet there's a man out here who thinks he's too yeller to come out an' face him."

We separated then, and entered town on opposite sides of the street. Darnell and I sauntered into the tavern, into the lobby, and then the saloon and out again into the stage-coach post without seeing anything of Slade. Whereupon we started down the dusty street and we looked into the several restaurants and stores.

Finally we came to Pierce's place. Through the wide open door we could see that the hall was full of smoke and noise and men, just as it was at night. Suddenly Darnell's eyes flashed.

"There's the damn homore," he whispered, "gamblin' at that table next to the roulette wheel."

Slowly we entered and I was aware of a constriction of my throat and the pounding of my heart. I resented this agitation.

"Tom, suppose you let me tell Slade," I suggested.

"Wal, mebbe, but I'll trail alongside of you, and I'll be between you an' Slade, you bet. Let's walk up to the table slow-like, look at the game, an' when I give you a little kick you tell Slade an' talk loud so every damn man in this saloon will hear you."

We approached the gambling-table. There were four men playing and Slade sat facing us with his face bent over his cards. At that distance he was easily recognizable, but he was vastly different from what I remembered. His unkempt hair hung down over his forehead and his face was dark and unshaven. We stopped behind the players and watched the game for a moment, then Darnell edged around to the right close to Slade and I kept my position.

Presently Darnell gave me an almost imperceptible signal, at which I

drew a deep breath.

"Gentlemen," I began in a loud voice, "excuse me for interrupting your game."

I waited for a moment. All four of the men looked up quickly, but I saw only Slade's face. His eyes were the gloomy furnace windows of an evil soul.

"What d'ye mean buttin' in here?" he queried irascibly.

"Slade," I shouted, rising to the moment, "there's a man waiting for you outside who says you're too yellow to come out and face him!"

Slade whipped out his big gun with foul and menacing speech in which I distinguished "tenderfoot" and "Yankee." But before he could level the gun Darnell seized his wrist and with powerful sweep extended his arm high over his head and held it there.

"What would you do, you bloody murderer?" demanded Darnell harshly. "Kill a man in cold blood jest for bringin' you a message? That'd prove you're a yeller dog."

All three of the other gamblers got to their feet and one of them wrenched the gun out of Slade's hand.

"He's right, Joe," said this man stridently. "You can't do this sort of thing in here. They'd lynch you."

With that Darnell let go of Slade's arm and wheeling to me, dragged me from the spot where I seemed to be rooted. He pulled me out of the saloon, and it was there that I was again able to breathe deeply.

"Pard, we got out of it fine!" ejaculated Darnell. "You shore told him. Everybody in town will know pronto that Slade has been called out."

We hurried up the sidewalk 50 paces or more and then stopped to watch. The crowd was spilling out of Pierce's. Part of them went one way and part another.

Shaw walked down the middle of the street until within 50 steps of Pierce's door and there he halted, motionless, tall and slim, his right side turned toward the direction from which he expected his enemy.

"There, look, you'll see Jack on the other side of the street," whispered Darnell. "He'll motion to Shaw if he sees Slade comin' to the door."

After a few tense moments Shaw resumed his pacing the street, this time walking down past the saloon. Presently he turned to come back. The drivers of vehicles, and others who had not been in Pierce's saloon, were quick to realize what was about to happen. Those that were close to Shaw moved back out of range and those on our side of the saloon halted on the sidewalk close to the buildings.

The noise of shuffling boots and excited voices died down and there was silence. It seemed to last for an interminable time. But Slade did not appear.

I heard a scream and a clatter of hoofs to our left. As I wheeled, Darnell ejaculated, "Gosh, look at them horses comin'! Runaway!"

I saw a team of furiously plunging horses dragging a high-wheeled buckboard down the middle of the street. The driver was a girl, and she was desperately hanging on to the reins trying to stop the horses. I leaped the hitching-rail into the street. Darnell called for me to look out, but he jumped to my side.

Suddenly, as the runaway drew rapidly close, I recognized the driver as the prairie-schooner girl who had waved at me. I bounded forward, and as the horses came on, I broke into a

run that would enable me to keep pace with them as they came abreast.

I timed the instant correctly and leaped for the bridle of the near horse, and seizing it with both hands, I hung on and sagged with all my weight upon it. I was dragged along. I would have stopped the team if the other horse had not kept on in his mad action. But I checked their speed.

Darnell flashed by me in front of the horses and he leaped to get hold of the bridle or head strap of the free horse. Lying back with all his weight, he yelled, "We can't stop them. Make the girl jump!"

I let go, floundered to my feet, and started to run again, even with the driver's seat. "Jump!" I yelled. "I'll catch you. *Jump!*"

She stood up and propelled herself into the air, striking me squarely in the chest. I caught her, and I went down, but I broke the force of her fall as we landed in the dust. She had fallen half across me. I extricated myself with difficulty and dragged her to her feet. I turned to see men had run to Darnell's assistance and had stopped the team halfway down the block. Then I turned to the girl.

"Well, for heaven's sake, if it isn't you," she exclaimed.

"Are—you—hurt?" was all I could stammer.

"No, thanks to you. I should really ask you if you're almost broken in two," she replied, appraising me with level blue eyes. "Some fresh hombre threw a pebble at my horses. Ace is a bit fractious an' he bolted. I'd have held him, but one of the reins broke."

It was indeed the girl of the wagon train. She was quite tall and, as she instinctively brushed the dust from her blouse, never removing her glance from my face, I saw she was of graceful, superb build.

"I'm a lucky man—" I found myself saying. "You see, I've never forgotten you. I thought of you constantly, Miss."

"Sunderlund. Kit Sunderlund. And I'm the one who is lucky," she smiled.

"I didn't mean about this near accident," I went on.

"You're not any slower on talk than Texas cowboys, I can hear. But—I remembered you, too. You're not a cowboy—or a Westerner."

"I'm a Yankee tenderfoot from Boston."

"You didn't act much like a tenderfoot," she replied with a warm smile. "Aren't you the young Harvard man on this Western Union work?"

"Yes, I am Wayne Cameron."

"Here comes my father now. He will want to thank you, and I shall want to too, later. We are staying at the hotel tonight, and will catch up with the train tomorrow. Will you come to see me?"

"Will I? Thanks, I surely will."

Then she turned to meet her father, who stepped from the board walk to meet her. Evidently Sunderlund had witnessed the whole proceeding for he certainly looked alarmed.

"Kit, you're not hurt, are you?"

"Not at all, Father, thanks to this young man."

"Cameron, I thank you too, but thanks are not enough. I saw the whole thing. Yore partner Darnell must also come in for his share of thanks."

"I'm sure he deserves more than I, for I would never have thought of calling for your daughter to jump."

"Wal, it was shore fortunate for

the Sunderlunds," he returned with courtliness. "I'll see you later. We are remainin' in town all day. Come, Kit, let's get out of this crowd."

The girl's dazzling, promising smile as she turned away with her father left me quite overwhelmed. I knew I had fallen head over heels in love with her. I leaned against the hitching-rail in a daze, a confusion of thoughts making me oblivious to my surroundings.

Suddenly my memory took me back to the object of this visit to town. The crowds were dispersing and lining back upon the board walk; two laborers were leading the runaway team away, and on the moment Darnell came to my side to say:

"Wal, our pard bluffed the great killer an' made a yeller dog of him in the eyes of every man here. There ain't anythin' to come off. Shaw an' Lowden have gone up the street, I reckon on the way to our camp. Let's go."

"Tom, did you see that young lady jump into my arms and knock me over?" I inquired, in somewhat awed tones.

"Shore I seen it."

"Tom, that girl's name is Kit Sunderlund and she's the daughter of the Texas cattleman whom you talked with."

"Hell! Is that so? So Jim Sunderlund of the Sweetwater is her uncle, an' she's goin' with her father to live in that valley. My Gawd, that's tough."

"Tough? Why so?" I asked quickly.

"Wal, I reckon it's hard to say jest what I mean. She's too beautiful to be stacked up against all those woman-hungry cowboys and cattlemen."

By the time we reached the end of the street we had caught up with Shaw and Lowden and soon turned out into the prairie toward our camp.

"Vance," I spoke up, "you called the turn on this fellow Slade."

"Wal, I reckon so," he drawled, "but, of course, it wouldn't do to be too damn shore. What come off in thet saloon? When I seen you come out your face was as white as a sheet."

While Darnell interposed to tell in forceful words what we had done, I wondered if Vance had also seen the runaway team and who was driving it.

"What the hell!" burst out Lowden. "If Slade ain't about the orneriest cuss I ever heared of."

Talking thus, we arrived at our wagon and Shaw called out cheerily, "Wal, Pedro-Ruby, we're back without mussin' a hair. Nothin' happened, at least to me, but if I'm any judge of things, somethin' turrible happened to our Yankee pard."

Ruby came out to sit down on the end of the wagon bed and let her little feet hang over. To a casual glance she was merely a good-looking Mexican youth, but the eyes she fixed upon Shaw were darkly strained and dilated and there was an expression in them that actually hurt me. She managed to whisper huskily that she was glad he had gotten back safely.

"Pards," spoke up Vance, "it might be a good idee for us to pull out of town along the river an' make camp somewhere in the willows."

"That'll—be fine," I said haltingly. "I suppose I can walk back to town tonight."

"What for, you darn fool?" queried Shaw quickly.

"I've got to, Vance. I made an en-

gagement with that—that girl. Didn't you see the runaway? Didn't you see Tom and me stop the team—and the girl jump out in my arms to pile me on the ground?"

"Shore, me an' Jack seen thet."

"Vance, the girl was Kit Sunderlund."

"Come here," snapped Shaw, and he laid hold of me. "Come over here where I can cuss you by yoreself."

He dragged me out of earshot of the others and, as he whirled me around to face him, I spoke somewhat stiffly.

"Vance, I see no reason for any force or mystery over the simple fact that I have a date with Kit Sunderlund, unless you're still in love, yourself."

"Don't get yore Yankee back up," rejoined Shaw, a little caustically. "I'm yore friend."

"Shaw, some days ago, back along the trail, you remember, I told you I saw that girl in a prairie schooner? Well, even with that short glimpse I was pretty hard hit. And today—well, damn the luck, there's no guessing about it—I never in my life fell so deeply in love."

"Thet's tellin' me, pard. I feared it," returned Shaw. "It's kinda hard to say an' I couldn't mean no disrespect to Kit Sunderlund, but yo're my friend an' I gotta give you a hunch. Kit Sunderlund has been the belle of Santone for years, ever since she was fifteen, an' she's twenty now. Kit is a natural born flirt. She's had more pore devils in love with her, than anyone I ever heared of. I was one of them. I rode for her dad for three years.

"Kit just cain't help makin' the boys love her. She never done anythin' but smile an' be gay. It's just the way she is. Why, with all the chances I had, I never held her hand but a couple of times, an' I kissed her once. I'll never forget thet. She was mad as a hornet."

"Vance, I don't see anything in what you've said to—to make me regret falling in love with her. You've paid her nothing but compliments even if you do say she is a flirt."

"No, pard, it ain't atall," replied Vance, positively. "Thet's the whole trouble. I just cain't see Kit fallin' for any man. An' thet's what I'm afraid of—you fallin' so hard for her an' her not returnin' it."

"Vance, even if my heart is involved, that isn't saying that Kit Sunderlund will break it."

"The hell it ain't! I've seen too many fine young fellers go plumb to hell on account of bein' in love with Kit Sunderlund."

"You put me in a difficult position, Vance. You see—during the few moments I talked with Kit she gave me the impression that she entertained precisely the same feeling for me."

"Hell, pard, you make me feel bad," returned Shaw remorsefully. "I ain't no prophet. I tell you I'm mebbe wrong. I was only playin' the cairds as they come to me in this deal. Let's go back to the wagon an' get ready to pull out."

Without more ado we returned to the wagon and busied ourselves in preparation to leave. In due time we were ready to start and Lowden appeared with the three horses belonging to the cowboys.

We turned westward, taking the precaution to travel outside of the town following the wheel tracks of some of our wagons. Darnell drove

the oxen as usual, and Ruby sat on the driver's seat beside him. Shaw and Lowden rode ahead on their horses, while Darnell's animal was haltered to the back of the wagon.

I lay down on one of the bunks and contended with the commotion within me, nor could I quite make Vance out. Was he giving me friendly advice or, as I prayed not, was he telling me in his cowboy way that he was still in love with Kit?

When we passed the long line of shacks and high board-fronted buildings, I found myself sentimentally looking for the high buckboard and spirited team of black horses that had come running headlong into my life and had left me, I was sure, somehow transformed. Soon we entered the wide trail, and in a little while only the dust and smoke of Gothenburg remained in my sight above the horizon.

In my melancholy reflection regarding Kit Sunderlund, there seemed to be contention between what little sanity I had left and the facts which Shaw had told me. I had sense enough to realize that all my emotions had been tremendously sharpened and augmented by this first contact with the West. My reactions to circumstances were bound not to be normal, at least until by hard knocks and privation and catastrophe I had been hauled down out of the clouds to actual reality. It was hard to overcome—my romantic obsession.

I let the fact speak for itself—that I had decided to give up seeing Kit Sunderlund and was already on my way out of sight of that town. But I found how useless it was to try to imagine I was not hurt. I had never been so in love with a girl. Often the sensations would creep into my mind that I had felt when she leaped solidly from the wagon into my arms, propelling me headlong to the ground. I remembered the feel of her as we lay there an instant, and then when I scrambled to my feet lifting her with me, how she leaned against me, holding to me and gazing into my eyes with wonder and joyful recognition. It was something that I could not contend with. That was an unforgettable moment and had only grown to be bitter since Shaw had undermined my exalted estimate of her.

Yet deep in my heart there was some instinct, some rebellious significance which clamored that Shaw was only a repudiated lover and that his opinion was biased. Perhaps I had acted with wisdom but I was full of regret and I had a conviction that the romance was not ended by a long way. I must have lain there a considerable time slowly working out of my misery and reconciling myself to fate. And presently the stern call of this building of Western Union returned again with zest and thrill.

The halting of the wagon attested to our arrival at our new camp. Shaw and Lowden were unsaddling their horses and I walked over to admire these wonderful steeds at close range. Shaw's horse was a sorrel, racy and thoroughbred and quite a contrast to Lowden's mottled chestnut mustang, a really small animal, but so sturdy and muscular that he looked large.

"Pard, don't lay a hand on him. He'll try to kill you," advised Lowden.

"Gee, aren't these beasts friendly?" I asked. "I don't want to try to ride a horse that's wild."

"Wal, I wouldn't advise yore learnin' on my hawss or Jack's, but Tom

says his hawss is gentle."

"If Tom's hoss is gentle I'll eat him," remarked Lowden sarcastically.

"Anyway, yo're due to find out," drawled Shaw. "When we passed Liligh an' his gang back heah a few miles, he said for us to ride back an' go to work."

"Then we passed the end of the construction work?" I asked.

"Shore did," replied Shaw. "Look at thet smoke off down the river. See thet? Thet's Sunderlund's wagon train. He's halted for camp. I reckon not over five miles away."

"Well, Vance, five miles is as much as a thousand as far as I'm concerned," I replied shortly.

"Tom is goin' to stay heah in camp," said Vance. "He's got some work to do on the wagon an' we'll grab a snack of grub an' rustle back to work."

That evening as we were sitting around the campfire, Creighton sent for me to take down in my rather amateurish way an emergency message which he was expecting from the East. It had to do with wire and poles and men. And it also had to do with men of the same country who were fighting a war with each other.

"Fellows," I said soberly, when later I returned, "the Civil War is on. Big battles are being fought and a lot of us fellows from the North are shooting a lot of you fellows from the South, and vice versa."

There was a silence broken only by the quiet crackling of the fire and a slow wind moving through the grass.

Looking backward across the interval of days and weeks of back-breaking toil, it seemed an endless time to our camp near Ogallala from that one back along the river at our first stop out of Gothenburg. It remained in my memory only because at the Ogallala camp Sunderlund had driven by in his buckboard with his daughter, and they had stopped to inquire for me. I had spied them coming and had left camp, determined to stick to my resolution not to see her, for the present at least.

I had labored until there was no thrill left of pleasant sensation any more. Perhaps I had plunged into the thing too eagerly to conserve any energy and strength. As if the manual labor was not enough, never a day passed in which I was not called upon to minister to some injured laborer. Superficial cuts and bruises, burns and abrasions, all the minor injuries that happened along were easy to contend with. But I had broken arms and broken legs to take care of, gunshot wounds, one of which was fatal, fever and dysentery, and all kinds of serious ailments that put a tremendous responsibility upon my limited medical knowledge. Sometimes, as weary as I was, I could not sleep for worry.

Always I had Creighton as an example. He was indefatigable, indomitable, a leader of men. If we had to stop for a day, he redoubled the work on the next. Yet he was cheerful, kind, patient, untiring, forever the unquenchable leader.

Though the weeks seemed endless by reason of the ordeal, it was really a short time. I gazed at my ragged garb, at my worn-out boots, at the calloused blisters on my palms, and the backs of my hands sunburned to blackness; I felt the stubble of my chin and could not remember when I

had cared last to shave. I felt my spare limbs that had grown thin and hard as iron, and I marveled at the changes labor and pain and endurance could make in a man.

We were camped on a rise above the river about half way between Ogallala and Julesburg. It was late August. The weather had been hot and dry, and a red haze obscured the sinking sun. The fragrance of savory bacon and coffee and hot biscuits awakened me eagerly to thoughts of supper. Evidently it was not ready yet for they did not call me.

Several times during the last half hour I had seen Shaw halt in his tracks, lift his head with that hawk-like action so characteristic of him, and face the north. He did not seem to be looking, as much as feeling. Something attracted him out there across the plains, and it developed that Lowden had not missed it either.

"Pard, what the hell is eatin' you?" he queried.

"Jack, old pard, up here in the north yore sense of fear seems to have been lulled. If you was as keen as you used to be, you would have seen thet it had to do with my nose."

Lowden, who was kneeling beside the fire, lifting the lid off the dutch oven to see if the biscuits were brown enough, slowly arose to his feet. "Nose? Hell! What d'ye smell?"

"Turn around an' take a sniff or two."

Lowden was quick to answer to that suggestion, while Darnell looked up with keen interest and Ruby stopped anxiously beside Shaw. I, too, curiously faced the north and smelled the cool breeze in my face.

"Dawggone!" ejaculated Lowden. "Smoke! Smoke, by gosh! Tom, do you ketch it?"

"No, I don't, pards, but that ain't sayin' anythin'. My smeller is not much good. It hasn't worked very well since I got kicked by a hoss."

"Jack, I was hopin' you'd tell me thet was campfire smoke," said Vance.

"Wal, I cain't," responded Jack shortly, and he walked away from the campfire toward the river bank.

My curiosity grew into intense interest. I strode toward the bank to join Lowden and presently Shaw followed me. We stood there silently for a few moments. Then Ruby came and stuck her arm through Shaw's. "What it is, Vance?" she whispered, in troubled tone.

"I was hopin' I wouldn't have to say," responded Shaw, "but it's been growin' on me the last half hour. All afternoon I didn't like the look of the clouds an' the feel of the air. It was heavy an' felt like it was bein' pushed south. But only in the last half hour did I catch thet smell of smoke."

"Thet smoke ain't so good," returned Jack. "We're in the wussest place we've been in since we left Ogallala. Grass an' brush awful thick an' dry as tinder. It ain't so good!"

"Boys, out with it. Tell me what's wrong," I demanded anxiously.

"Prairie fire!" exclaimed Shaw. "An' if it runs before a norther it will be hell for us. I'm afraid it's comin' but I cain't be shore for half an hour mebbe. Let's eat an' wait a bit."

We returned to the campfire which Jack replenished with bits of brush. They burned up brightly and we sat down and fell to in hungry silence. The coyotes had begun their hue and cry. The sharp concatenation of yelps seemed more piercing than usual.

Then, from across the river and not so far away, there sounded a long, mournful, bloodcurdling howl.

"What's that?" I asked my cup of coffee poised in my hand.

"Thet's a wolf, my Yankee friend, an' he ain't very cheerful," returned Shaw grimly.

About that time the breeze suddenly increased to a wind that blew hard and cold and steadily. With it came a perceptible dry pungent odor of burning brush. Shaw finished his cup of coffee and rising to his height once more, gave his attention to the north.

"Pards, no use hopin' against hope," he said with decision. "Jack, you an' Tom clear away heah, then get the hosses in an' the oxen an' hitch up. Wayne, you come with me. We'll go tell Creighton. It's a prairie fire an' a norther an' we're right in the track of both!"

Chapter Seven

Wildfire!

CREIGHTON was at the table in his wagon writing before a bright light. "Hello, boys. Come on up," he greeted us in answer to our call. "Well, Cameron, you look kind of pale behind the gills, and Shaw, you look as if you were about to pull a gun."

"Boss," replied the cowboy, "there's a norther blowin' down on us."

"Yes, I thought I had begun to feel a little chilly. But that in itself can't be bad news."

"Boss, it's blowin' a prairie fire ahead of it."

"Indeed! That's different. How serious is it, Shaw?"

"I cain't say, Mr. Creighton, but even at the best it'll be bad enough. This stretch along the river here is very thick with grass an' brush an' it will burn. With thet wind behind it, it'll run along like powder. It'll be wildfire."

"That'll be something new. With Liligh away I wouldn't know how to meet it."

"You cain't take time to send for Liligh. We've got to do somethin' pronto."

"I appreciate that, Shaw, but *what?* Spill it."

"By all means I'd advise packin' all yore supplies, hitchin' up the wagons an' drivin' them into the river bed. It's pretty wide along here. The water runs mostly on the north side an' there's sand bars thet have dried out an' will hold up the wagons. Lucky for us, sir, thet thet space between the river banks is pretty wide, else we'd have to leave everythin' an' run for our lives."

"Indeed it is serious," returned Creighton, rising and picking up his coat. "I'm lucky to have a plainsman like you in the outfit. Is there any way to tell how quickly this fire will be down upon us?"

"Not yet. The sky has begun to get red up toward the north. I'm advisin' we rustle, sir."

"That's enough, Shaw. Go back to your wagon and get that in shipshape. Cameron, you come with me and we'll give the men orders. Liligh ought to be here."

I followed Shaw down out of the wagon to see him stride swiftly toward the river. Creighton came after me putting on his coat and we both stood motionless for a moment watch-

ing the strange ruddy glow in the north.

"No time to be lost, boy," said Creighton. "You can repeat my orders to the men below and I will take care of these at hand."

I stayed long enough with Creighton to hear him shout at the first group of men around the campfire. I left him then, and running down the line I burst upon the next group of men around the campfire and yelled, "Creighton's orders! Prairie fire! Teamsters are to bring in the oxen and mules—hitch up—and the rest of you pack everything with all possible haste!"

In short order I had acquainted all the men on that side of the camp with our leader's orders and the need for haste. Then I slowed down to catch my breath and made for our camp on the river.

Tom and Jack were hitching up the oxen, the horses were tethered near at hand, saddled and bridled, and Shaw stood on the bank, peering ahead.

I joined Shaw and told him how I had followed out the order of our leader and asked him if the situation had changed anything for the worse.

"I reckon it's shore bad. I can see yore face plainer than I could a while ago. An' it shines pretty red. Now look out in the river. We can see the bare spots of sand an' the puddles an' the big patch of water out yonder. We'll have to cut down this bank a little because it's too steep to take off. Go get some shovels an' tell the boys to come help us when they've hitched up."

Presently we were all laboring strenuously to cut the river bank into a slant over which it would be safe to drive the wagon. Darnell got the ax and cut out saplings and overhanging branches. I purposely did not turn toward the north until my share of the task was finished. Then, with Ruby standing beside me holding my arm, I looked, and for the first time felt awe and fear. The sky was a strange red and all the stars had been blotted out.

"Wayne, I've been in a couple of prairie fires," said Ruby. "But not in a place like this. It's bad."

"But, Ruby, where's the danger?" I asked. "Those sand bars are a hundred feet from this side and three hundred feet from the other. The fire can't touch us there."

"Oh, you don't realize!" she exclaimed. "The wind will carry fire—flames will leap on high and reach ahead—oh, hundreds of feet! That is, if there's a hard enough wind."

By proceeding carefully and picking out the way we arrived at the sand bar without incident. It was hard-packed sand and gravel, an area of perhaps half an acre in extent, and at its edge there was running water. I felt that we had a very fortunate position and wondered how it would be for the other wagons. Then I turned to see how my comrades were faring.

Shaw led the way riding his horse and leading the other two. I heard him call out directions to Darnell who was driving the oxen. Lowden was on foot. When the oxen reached the foot of the slant they sank to their knees, but that was nothing to the powerful brutes. They waded right through the deep sand. When the heavy wagon struck the soft places the wheels sank hub deep and finally ceased to turn.

"Come, Jack, fork your hoss an' get

yore rope out. We gotta help pull the wagon out of thet hole."

The cowboys fastened rope to the tongue of the wagon and helped the oxen haul the wagon out of that bad place. Soon our vehicle and supplies and animals were safely with us on the patch of solid sand.

Shaw dismounted and he and Jack tethered the three horses to the wagon wheels. Shaw remarked that we were all right in that location unless there should be a regular cyclone blowing. He and Jack were not so sanguine about the other wagons. We could still see the fires burning in the construction camp and a great deal of bustle going on there, but so far as we observed, none of those wagons had got started yet.

"If they don't get goin' soon some of them will be in for disaster," Shaw remarked. "Jack, you better run over and tell Mr. Creighton to drive his wagon over here, an' a couple of other wagons thet he wants. One of them shore ought to be the grub wagon."

Lowden trudged away and soon disappeared shoreward. And then Shaw said that they might be going to burn up but it was darn cold right then and he was going to build a fire. He told me to take a shovel and make a bank of sand behind the only clump of willows on the island. While I was engaged at this task, he and Tom went ashore for firewood.

Ruby got off the wagon seat where she had climbed and came close to me, evidently lonesome and probably frightened. "Wayne," she spoke up timidly, "I remember back on the Trail days and days ago, that I saw you leave camp when that Sunderlund girl with her father drove by our camp. Vance saw you, too. I'm wondering what in the world made you do that?"

"Well, Ruby, it's not a very long story," I replied.

"It doesn't strike me that you'd be afraid of any girl," she said as if to herself.

Then I frankly told her about the first time I had seen Kit Sunderlund, that it was probably love at first sight, that I was sure of it the day I rescued her from the runaway, and that I really was in the seventh heaven until Vance dragged me down by the things he had said.

"But, Wayne, he's a cowboy," she expostulated, "and cowboys don't know anything about girls. He told me right out he used to be in love with Kit, and that he knew that he had no show at all with her."

"Ruby, you surely are a fine kid to talk that way," I replied, feelingly, "knowing Vance was crazy over that girl. You're not jealous, but I suspect that Shaw was jealous of me."

"I don't believe it, Wayne. Even if Shaw loved Kit more than he did me, he's too big for that. He'd die before he showed it," Ruby said earnestly.

"Well, I'd like to know what would have happened if I had gone to see Kit Sunderlund that night. And I just wonder what I'd do if I ever met her again."

"You probably will, Wayne. That wagon train can't be far ahead of us."

The cowboys returned, each carrying an armful of wood with which Shaw soon built a fire. In my excitement I had not realized my hands were almost numb with cold and that I was extremely uncomfortable. The fire felt very good.

"Tom," spoke up Shaw, "grab a bucket an' let's get some fresh wa-

ter before it is all full of dirt. Wayne, you bring some water bags. I wish Creighton an' those other fellers would get a move on. Mark what I tell you, Tom, they're gonna lose somethin' if they don't rustle."

We went back to the wagon and carefully covered the buckets, and I stowed away the water bags inside the wagon. It was blowing so hard now that we had to speak loud to make each other hear. Presently a crashing in the brush on the bank and a driver yelling at his oxen acquainted us with the fact that one wagon was approaching. It finally reached the bank and, directed by Lowden, labored across to our island and took up a position at the lower end. This man drove his oxen until they were all knee-deep in water.

Other wagons were approaching the river. We saw one come out below us 50 feet or more and get in trouble in the sand. Above us wagon after wagon worked out into the river bed, some of them in the water and some of them more fortunately located on sand bars.

It was light enough now for us to see distinctly, only everything was strange and unreal in that red glow. Another wagon came lumbering out to our position and took the upper end of our island. When I attended once more to the spectacle in the north I found that I could not take my eyes away from it again.

The scene was changing. The sky was the color of flame. That augmenting red meant the approach of storm-driven fire. Presently all across the line where the black of the horizon met the crimson of the sky, clouds of smoke rolled upward. The cowboys yelled at sight of this. The rapidity with which the clouds rolled upward amazed me and gave evidence of the power of the wind behind.

In a few moments a quarter of the red sky was blotted out by these rolling, mushrooming, bellowing clouds transforming, marvelously beautiful in their colors of yellow and black and white, all streaming upward and forward vividly reflecting the fire underneath. Every second I expected to see flame. Low down at the bottom of these clouds a bright line intensified.

Jack had climbed on top of our wagon. "I see it, Vance," he yelled. "Comin' hell-bent for election, an' I reckon if we don't take to the water we're gone goslin's."

"Hell, no," shouted Shaw, as he faced the north, his lean grim face red in the firelight. "We'll get blistered shore, an' have hell with the stock, but our lives will be safe here."

"Whoopee!" yelled Lowden, from the top of the wagon. An instant later, as if by magic, I saw the curved tips of fiery forked flames leap into sight all along the horizon. There was something supernatural in that sight. The leaping, upflinging motion showed the powerful energy of the wind and fire. If they leaped into sight in one instant, in another they had lifted high above the ground.

It was a monstrous wall of flame, in furious swift action, driven by a gale of wind. Marvelous and unbelievable was the way the streaks and streams of smoke shot upward to roll and spread into clouds that formed the immense curtain, a color of infinite varied hues, a canopy that now swept upward and toward us with frightful celerity.

Shaw joined us and called out, his voice now ringing, "She's a humding-

er an' she'll be on us pronto. Hear thet roar!"

I became aware of a low, strange sound increasing in volume while I listened. It was not like any sound that I had ever heard. The wall of fire topped by the waving, flinging tongues of flame could not have been more than half a mile away now, and it was approaching us with awful rapidity. It stayed level at this period although its leaping points varied along the line. The heavier, thicker brush and grass bordering the river bottom would, of course, add to the height of the flames.

Now in the intense light, the opposite shore did not seem so far from us and our danger lay in the possibility of these flames reaching out toward us, possibly spreading over us, in which case we were doomed. Even if we submerged ourselves in the river the heat would be fatal. But I still hoped and felt sure that the flames could not leap far enough across the river to make our position untenable.

I now saw flaming bits of wood and brush and millions of sparks racing low and ahead of the wind and these certainly would cross the river and fire the brush on the opposite side. The wall of fire, the forked tongues of flame, the mounting roar rushed down upon us and held us spellbound and mute.

I felt Ruby's little hands like bands of steel on my arm. The spectacle was at its grandest and most appalling when the fire struck the thick grass and brush on the edge of the river. There came a tremendous explosion all along back of the river and immense puffs of smoke and sparks and flames, and a hissing, crackling, destroying roar, the like

of which I had never dreamed. I observed birds in flight, and hundreds of jack rabbits and other animals, some of them coyotes and antelope, fleeing like phantoms in the eerie light and leaping over the bank to disappear. I saw antelope swimming across the red-flaring patch of river.

It was a magnificent, hellish, appalling storm of fire that blotted out the shore and leaped half across the river. The smoke was over us; and underneath a streaking flood of burning bits of wood, flying on the wings of the wind. Fiery sparks as large as my hand fell all around us. The oxen surged in their yokes. The cowboys leaped down to hold the plunging horses that had been covered with blankets and tarpaulins.

Then the wave of heat struck us. I seemed to shrivel up. Ruby fell on her knees in front of the wagon, and I, with seared eyeballs, watched for a moment longer to see that awful spectacle of fire reach its limit on the shore and then become obscured in dust and smoke. I covered my burning face with my scarf and bent to my knees, terror-stricken, yet never losing that horrible roar of gale and fire.

Measured by my agony and terror the culminating moments of that catastrophe seemed endlessly long and torturing. Gradually, however, the roar lessened and passed from the opposite shore across the void and became louder behind us. The crackling, bursting force receded and I realized the wind was carrying the fire onward, away from us.

Once more I heard the men shouting. The cowboys were yelling, and I opened my eyes and uncovered my face. The terrific roar had passed away. All about me was dim, gray, smoky. I found breathing extremely difficult. On the bank near us were denuded willow trees with their stems still blazing. Here and there on the ground small fires burned. The holocaust had passed, leaving hardly anything to burn.

Up and down the river there was commotion among the men and hoarse shouts everywhere. Wagons were in flames. Everywhere the men were throwing water, hanging on to the plunging oxen, tossing burning articles from the wagons, or rolling telegraph poles into the water.

Shaw, who was working madly, screeched at me to come out of it and put out the fire in our canvas top. I leaped down and seizing a bucket, I ran into the water. Then I saw Lowden trying to hold the surging oxen.

"Throw some water on them, pard," he yelled. I complied with all the haste I could muster. They stopped their plunging as I put out the fiery embers on their backs. Then, refilling the bucket, I ran to the wagon. Darnell was on top beating out burning places.

"Here," he yelled. "Throw some here, and here! Rustle another bucket."

Shaw had succeeded in quieting his horse and he joined me with a pail. Lowden remained with the oxen.

The succeeding couple of hours were a nightmare. Up the river for 200 yards we found the wagons in bad shape. The canvas covers of many had been completely burned off and the contents badly damaged. Many loads of telegraph poles had been left standing on the bank. Wagons and poles had both caught on fire.

By midnight we had all the fires out and both oxen and wagons safe on the shore. We left our wagon on our little island but we unhitched the oxen and freed them of the heavy yokes.

Ruby laughed at me. "You're a ragamuffin," she said. "Holes in your clothes, and hands and face black—oh, you're a sight. But, Wayne, can't you do something for my back where it was burned?"

"Of course I can, Ruby. Let me catch my breath and wash my hands."

By the light of the campfire I ministered as well as possible to Ruby. She had sustained a bad burn in the middle of her back and I thought that it would leave a scar. I used oil and salve on her wound and bound it up with soft linen.

"Say, Doc Wayne," exclaimed Ruby, "thanks all the same for your kind services, but I'd hate to have you set my leg if it got broke."

"You ungrateful little imp! Why, I'd like to know?"

"Why? You're rougher'n hell, that's why," she retorted.

"I guess I was at that," I replied contritely, "but my own hands are scorched. They're sore and clumsy and I'm so gosh darned tired that I couldn't be gentle."

It developed that there was no rest for the weary. Almost all had burns and abrasions that needed attention. Ruby went to bed but the boys remained awake and helped me all they could. They kept the fire burning so I had a light and so we would not freeze.

Creighton's wagon had not escaped

unscathed and would need a lot of canvas patched and he himself had sustained a bad leg burn. In his haste to save the precious telegraph poles he had fallen over a red hot coal and burned his leg severely below the knee.

Shaw accompanied me from wagon to wagon and so many were the hurts of the men that gray dawn was breaking in the east when Shaw and I returned to our camp.

"Pard, we better snatch a little sleep, 'cause Creighton will have us on the job at sunup just as if nothin' happened."

Despite my pangs, my extreme weariness caused me to drop to sleep at once and indeed the sun had been long up when I awoke. The boys were cooking breakfast and when I painfully clambered out of the wagon, I was astounded at the seared and blackened spectacle of the prairie on all sides.

I hurried over to the new camp to find Creighton and get the orders for the day, but he was extremely busy and I saw from the havoc that had been done to the wagons and oxen, it would hardly be possible for the construction work to get under way that day. Liligh had not shown up and we did not know what had happened to him and his men.

On the way back I talked with Herb Lane and it was his opinion that Creighton would form one outfit of all the wagons and men in good shape and set them to repairing the line.

I bethought myself of changing my tattered clothing when a messenger arrived from Creighton telling me to report at his wagon at once with my medicine kit. I hurriedly made my way across the blackened ground to the new camp. Before I reached Creighton's wagon I saw a buckboard with high wheels and a team of black horses that I recognized. Upon arriving at Creighton's wagon, I found him talking to the driver, who was sitting in the seat of the buckboard.

"Cameron, there's a hurry call from the Sunderlund wagon train. Some of Sunderlund's men have been badly burned and his daughter especially needs your services. Go and do what you can for them. The messenger ran across Liligh on the way over and found that he and his outfit had not suffered materially from the fire. You might look him up on the way back and report to me."

I acquiesced in few words, and climbing into the buckboard, put my kit under the seat. At once we were off and that fast-stepping team of blacks looked as if they would make short work of the miles.

"We had a bad night here, as you can well see," I remarked to the driver, by way of opening conversation. "How did Sunderlunds' wagon train make out?"

"Wal, we had the wust time since we started from Texas," he returned. "Our camp was about ten miles up the river from heah. And some of the wagons were in a bad place, but most of them was safe on bare ground."

"Did you take to the river with the wagons as we did?" I asked.

"Some of the men did and they come out all right, barrin' some burned canvas. It was the wagons thet got stuck in the brush and stalled in the sand thet suffered the most."

"What about Sunderlund's horses and that big herd of cattle?"

"The cattle stampeded to hell an' gone, an' it took one man to every

hawss to hold him. About fifty riders went out this mawnin' to round up the cattle. Looks like a forlorn hope to me. Just before the fire reached the river one of our scouts reported a band of Injuns—Cheyennes, he thought—ridin' by not so far from our camp. We've about struck the range of the Cheyennes an' they're hostile to the whites these days."

"How badly is Miss Sunderlund injured?" I at last came out with the question that I had wanted to ask first of all.

"I didn't heah, Doc," replied the driver.

With that I settled down to thoughtful silence and concern. As we sped along about five miles from our camp, I discovered Liligh's wagons ahead and soon saw his men at work. The men saw us drive by and Liligh waved to me. Beyond this point the ravages of the fire began to diminish.

After speeding on a few more miles I saw a long line of white-topped wagons. I noticed a good many oxen out on the plain apparently grazing, but I did not see that there was much left to graze upon. The driver drove off the trail along the first line of wagons and very shortly I was in the presence of Mr. Sunderlund with several of his associates whom I had met.

Sunderlund shook hands with me and inquired how Creighton's wagon train had fared. When I acquainted him with the details of our troubles and injuries, he expressed sympathy and replied that he had escaped any serious injuries but had lost some wagons and supplies and all the cattle.

"And Miss Sunderlund?" I inquired. "How is she?"

"Come with me to her wagon," he replied. "Kitty's foot was badly burned. It happened after the fire had passed us. She was running around in the dark tryin' to help an' she caught her foot between a couple of logs or branches thet were still red-hot."

The wagon he led me to near at hand was not so large as his own, but it was more pretentious and better cared for. There was a step leading up to the curtained opening in the back of the wagon, and at Mr. Sunderlund's call, a buxom Negro maid appeared and spread the curtain.

There evidently were several compartments in the wagon and in the middle one, which was very comfortably furnished, lay Kit Sunderlund on a bed, her head propped up on pillows. A light coverlet was spread over her, from under which protruded a little bare foot, clumsily bandaged. Her face was white and her large eyes, darkly violet, held an expression of pain. She wore something white with short sleeves to her elbows and altogether she made a picture that sent the blood back to my heart.

"Good day, Miss Sunderlund," I said cheerfully, as I deposited my kit on a chest. "I hope you're not badly burned."

"I'm in considerable pain, but I want you to understand that I did not send for you."

"Your father, as you must have heard, has asked me to attend you. I —I'm not a regular doctor but I'll try to relieve you."

"Thank you. Of course, it was good of you to come. I just wanted you to know I didn't send for you. Martha, you open the curtains to let in more light and wait near in case the—the doctor might need you."

"I won't require anything but a pan of hot water." Then without glancing at the girl I opened my medicine kit and laid out the bandages and medicines necessary. Drawing up a cushioned stool, I said in as professional a way as I could assume, "I'll look at your foot now."

She pulled up the coverlet slightly, further exposing her right foot and a shapely ankle. I removed the bandage from her foot, not without several emphatic protests from the girl, and I found the burn to be on her instep, a superficial one, not serious at all, but one that necessarily would cause considerable pain. Lint from the bandages had stuck on the raw spot and that had to be carefully washed off which I simply could not do without hurting her. Once she asked me very sweetly:

"At Harvard did you study regular medicine or to be a horse doctor?"

I passed by that comment, but for a moment I relaxed somewhat in my gentleness; moreover, with my sore hands it was difficult to work lightly, with the result that she cried out:

"Oh, you hurt me! You're a brute! And you're takin' so much time. Are you going to be all day at this task?"

"Miss Sunderlund, I told you I was not a regular physician," I replied with what dignity I could summon. "I am doing it as gently and rapidly as possible. I do not want to *prolong* the job. You have a lovely foot and ankle and you make a very bewitching picture here in your wagon train boudoir—but really that is nothing to me. I didn't *want* to come any more than evidently you wanted me."

"Cain't you get through quickly and get out?" she flashed, the red coming to her cheeks.

"I'll get through quickly if you'll stop wiggling—and making unnecessary comment about my work."

"But you're hurting me."

"Of course I'm hurting you. You've got a bad burn. You won't be able to wear a shoe or a boot for a month," I replied, exaggerating somewhat. "Are you a baby that you can't stand a little pain?"

"Mr. Cameron, you are as rude and ungentlemanly as you are uncouth in appearance and action."

"What would you expect, girl?" I demanded hotly. "I was up till midnight last night fighting fire and then dressed wounds until daylight."

"Very noble of you, Mr. Cameron, but I cain't see that you're helping me much," she returned sarcastically.

"Oh, shut up," I said, thoroughly nettled. "I'm beginning to believe some of the things I have heard about you."

That apparently subdued her for the moment. I anointed the injured member and then made a neat job of bandaging it; whereupon I turned away to the chest and began to pack my things.

"My father will reimburse you, Mr. Cameron, for your time and trouble."

At this sally I laughed outright. I purposely took several moments to pack my kit. I handed the pan of water down to the maid.

"Why didn't you keep the engagement with me the day we met?" she asked.

"Why do you suppose, Miss Sunderlund?" I returned, and I looked at her then. The red spots had left her cheeks and if there was not battle in her bright eyes I mistook the expression. "I had never wanted to keep a date with a girl so much in my life,"

I continued.

"Well, how do you think I felt?" she retorted scornfully.

"I don't know how *you* felt. I only imagined it. I daresay such a romantic meeting is merely an incident in your young life, but it was tremendous for me. That day I saw you first on the seat of that prairie schooner I —I couldn't forget you. When you leaped into my arms from that runaway wagon in Gothenburg and knocked me sprawling into the dust, I realized that I had fallen in love with you at first sight!"

"Yes, and you played up to it very well," she retorted, derisively. "But you ignored the opportunity I offered you. What did Vance Shaw tell you about me?" she flung at me, and she sat up in her bed, letting the coverlet fall somewhat and further distracting me with the revelation of her beauty.

"He said you made cowboys love you without a notion in your head of returning even a little."

"That's true, Mr. Cameron. I liked all cowboys. But I always hoped to meet one or some young men who might make me serious. And when I did meet him, what happened? He turned out to be even worse than the cowboys."

"What do you mean, Kit Sunderlund?" I demanded.

"You may be from Boston, you may have an eastern background, and you are a self-confessed Harvard man. For that reason you're more despicable than any of those cowboys, even Shaw."

"And may I ask why?" I queried quietly.

"You may ask, and I'll tell you," she cried. "When I rode up to your camp with my father and asked for you and found you were not there, I made a discovery. You had a girl with you in that wagon. Disguised as a boy! I *saw* her. She was back in the wagon partly undressed and she hastily tried to screen herself from my sight. But I saw her. She was a girl, and young and pretty. She was living with you all in that wagon. You were sharing her with your cowboy friends or they were sharing her with you."

"So you saw Ruby! Well, and *that* is what you think."

"Yes, that is what I thought. Do you deny it? I'm not an utter fool. If seeing that dance-hall girl in your wagon was not enough, you will be interested to know that my father was told in Gothenburg that you paid marked attention to this girl Ruby, and it was you who took her out of the dance hall."

"That is true, Miss Sunderlund. I did and I am most heartily proud of it. And I would like to inform you that that little dance-hall girl is bigger and finer than you and far more worthy. Good day."

Chapter Eight

The Fight at Julesburg

I ALMOST leaped out of the wagon in my bitter disappointment and fury and I made my way at once to where the buckboard and driver were waiting for me. Mr. Sunderlund was not in sight. Climbing into the buckboard, I told the driver to take me back to the construction camp at once. And at a word we were off.

The drive back to Creighton's camp

seemed short, undoubtedly owing to my state of mind. I saw that Creighton was moving wagons and evidently the catastrophe of the night before was merely another obstacle surmounted. I saw Shaw pacing up and down beside our wagon and it was certain that he spied me long before I had seen him.

I alighted from the buckboard and right then and there told him what had happened to me in Sunderlund's camp. The cowboy made no comment but, as he faced across the river, there was a convulsive working of his throat.

We were set to work at once, our wagon and crew along with half a dozen others, at repairing the eastern portion of the telegraph line that had been burned. For three days we toiled with twisted wires and charred poles, camping along the line where darkness found us. On the fourth day, we had the line again in running order, and traveled westward out of the blackened belt made by the fire. In the evening we came up with Creighton.

We pushed westward with all possible speed, sometimes erecting as much as seven miles of telegraph line in one day. A regiment of 30 dragoons met us out on the prairie, having come from Ft. Laramie. They reported an uprising of the Cheyennes and Sioux over in Wyoming. Sergeant Kinney said that Sunderlund's wagon train was about a score of miles ahead on the trail and that they had been able to round up only a few hundred of the Texas longhorns.

We settled down to hard work from daylight till dark. But the work was far from monotonous, especially after we saw our first small herd of buffalo and lean wild Indian riders. They gave us a wide berth, but they sat their ponies on high ridges and watched us. These nights the wagons were drawn in a circle and we made our fires and did our cooking on the inside. All night long soldier guards patrolled the line of wagons.

The days multiplied into weeks, the telegraph line was approaching the border of Colorado. Julesburg, with its unsavory fame, was not many days away.

I had killed my first buffalo, and I was tremendously proud of that beautiful, glossy, black and tawny robe. I had seen my first Indian in the act of pulling down the telegraph wire, and I had taken a shot at him, deliberately missing him, but scaring him away.

Creighton eventually put me on the job of nailing sharpened spikes around the telegraph poles about four feet from the ground in order to keep the cattle from rubbing against them and knocking them down. Darnell accompanied me and he packed the cumbersome sack of spikes and our tools while I carried the heavy rifles. We never went any place any more without a rifle.

We saw mounted Indians every day. They gave us a wide berth. But they would make a detour around us and always approach the telegraph line in our rear. I watched them through my field glasses. Evidently they regarded this wire stretched along on poles as something about which there was mystery and danger.

When the Indians decided to do violence to the line, which happened rather frequently, they would pile some buffalo chips against a pole and set fire to it. This rarely did any damage. Then they would hack at a pole

with their tomahawks. It took a long time for them to cut through one of the green poles with their little hatchets. But in this way they would bring the line to the ground. The telegraph message would still go through unless they broke the wire. Creighton had a repair wagon escorted by soldiers always working in our rear. Liligh claimed these straggling couples and bands of savages were out scouting for buffalo and that no real danger menaced us until we ran into a large body of Indians.

Toward the end of our drive on to the Colorado line, two wagon trains passed us, one of about ordinary length of approximately 60 wagons and the other fully three times that number. This caravan, viewed from a distance winding along the plain like a colossal serpent, made an imposing and inspiring spectable.

The telegraph-construction trains, again short of poles and with men and mules and oxen sorely in need of rest, rolled into camp on the banks of the South Platte River at Julesburg, Colorado, one sultry summer day at dusk.

It was too dark for me to make out what kind of place this Julesburg was. The camp along the river was not an attractive spot even under cover of darkness. All I could see of the town was some blinking yellow lights. I sat until the campfire died down to smoldering red coals.

As always when I yielded to an hour like this I remembered Kit Sunderlund. She seemed far away now. I had forgiven her unjust suspicion and remembered only the beauty of her as I saw her last.

At sunrise the next morning I rolled out in answer to Darnell's gentle boot to find the boys were getting breakfast. Ruby, who greeted me with a bright smile, was pattering with light feet between the campfire and the wagon. The morning was cold and clear, and the air had a nip to it. When I washed in the river, I knew what Darnell meant when he called it mountain water. I decided I would celebrate our arrival at Julesburg by shaving off my bristly beard.

While we were at breakfast Liligh made the rounds of the wagons to give us our instructions for the day. "Wal, boys, hyar we air in Julesburg. No telegraph poles, an' a hellish lot of wagon repairin' to do, an' Julesburg threatened by redskins. Shaw, yu an' Lowden ride out on a scoutin' trip, an', Cameron, yu an' Darnell look after yer wagon."

I was completely disillusioned by my surroundings. The prairie was unfriendly and barren; the river was a turgid, muddy stream bordered by stunted cottonwoods, denuded and stripped all along its banks by the wagon trains; and Julesburg itself turned out to be a row of five unsightly buildings, crude, drab, with their high board fronts facing the west apprehensively.

I went with Tom into the town, looked over the improvised telegraph station, stopped at the Overland Trail and Pony Express Station, went into the trading-store, made purchases of tobacco and some supplies of what they had on hand, and bought a lonesome box of candy for Ruby.

We looked for Slade and then inquired for him to learn that he was off on business on the Overland route toward Denver. This was a relief. There was a considerable crowd of

men and soldiers in town; they stood around in groups conversing and drinking over the counter.

Having exhausted the few sights of Julesburg, Tom and I returned to Creighton's camp and our own wagon where, after ceremoniously presenting Ruby with the box of stale candy, we took off our coats and addressed ourselves to much-needed tasks.

Shaw and Lowden returned at sundown, having traversed a 50-mile circle around our camp. They had seen a considerable number of buffalo passing north, to the west of Julesburg. No Indians had been sighted. However, the cowboys had seen Indian smoke signals, some of which they had studied with the field glass.

Shaw said he had interpreted these signals to Creighton and Liligh, but he did not vouchsafe as much to us. He was far too serious to suit me. Except when he looked at Ruby, he had a hard, steely glint in his amber eyes.

"Pards, I'm worried," Shaw said suddenly. "We're in for a fight here, shore as God made little apples. South of here about twenty miles Jack an' I run across a deep swale with water in the bottom. On the steep side of thet gully grew a lot of little fir trees. An' when I was makin' my report, one of them wagon-train bosses, Beal by name, heared me. He follered me an' asked for specific directions an' then without askin' Liligh or anyone else, he went after these fir trees. It's dollars to doughnuts that wagon train never gits back."

Liligh visited us before dark and asked Shaw to repeat the report that he had made to Creighton and to add to it any observations or opinions that he had omitted to the leader. The cowboy's much enlarged recital obviously made Liligh more serious than ever.

"Wal, thanks, cowboy," he said. "Thet dovetails in with my own figgerin'. I reckon we hev been purty lucky all the way along an' we'll git it rubbed in from now on."

"That's shore. What I'd like to know is how our boss is goin' to take bein' held up in the work."

"Shaw, he ain't goin' to be held up. Yu remember the line must be up an' in operation before the snow flies. An' yu know, of course, it's purty cold early in western Wyomin'. We ain't goin' to tell the boss what we think."

"But man alive, there is such a thing as sense. If we don't advise Creighton to go slow, why, the line might not go up atall, much farther."

"Mebbe a good brush with the redskins might be fun for a change. We're well armed an' we'll play safe. There's no sense alarmin' Creighton. But I reckon yu better haul yore wagon over in line with ours an' take yore turn standin' guard."

"Yo're daid right, Liligh. We can't be too watchful. I was goin' to do thet on my own accord."

Liligh left us then and it was evident that his visit had impressed Shaw rather unfavorably.

Soon after that Shaw told us to turn in. I went to sleep at once and barring one period during the night in which I lay awake awhile listening to the lonesome howl of the coyotes, I did not know any more until sunrise.

We spent most of that day working on our wagon and after the necessary tasks had been accomplished we did further work to make it as impreg-

nable to attack as possible. Above the sides of the wagon, as well as at the end, we raised a defense a foot or more higher and in lieu of wood or metal, we used pieces of dried buffalo hide which Lowden got in town at the store. They were as stiff and hard almost as iron. A man could kneel behind this barricade and be pretty well screened from bullets and safe from arrows.

We were told by some of the other men that there were a lot of Indians in town lounging around. Some of them were Utes, who were supposed to be friendly at that time, and there were several Arapahoes.

After our tasks were ended next morning, we went into Julesburg and I had my first sight of real plains Indians at close hand. I could not tell the difference between Utes and Arapahoes. They were not by any means a reassuring spectacle. It was a hot day, as usual, and the Indians had on practically no clothing at all. They wore breech clouts and leggings and moccasins of buckskin, and carried their blankets and weapons. While we were in town they spent the time in the neighborhood of the shack where the telegraph operator worked at his instrument. That strange metallic clicking evidently had a fascination for them.

By midday all the Indians had departed. They had mounted their wild mustangs in small groups and had ridden away in different directions. Concern was being felt about the wagon train that had, without specific orders, gone out for poles.

We found Sergeant Kinney with Liligh and several of the wagon-train bosses. "Liligh," spoke up Shaw, "what do you think about these Injuns leavin' town?"

"Dunno," answered Liligh tersely. "I've jest been talkin' to Sergeant Kinney about what to prepare fer. Would yu be good enough to give yer Texas angle on it?"

"Short an' sweet, Boss. Haul all the wagons into town, run them as close together as you can between the houses, an' drive the oxen down in the brush along the river. I'd suggest Sergeant Kinney puttin' half his soldiers in each end house an' let the rest of the men take their posts among the wagons an' the other houses."

"Right, cowboy," agreed Liligh. "Now, Shaw, go out on the detail yu was ordered on with Herb Lane ah' yu cowboys keep yer eyes peeled. Don't go too far away on thet job. Yu'll hev mule teams an' as the Injuns can't surprise yu on thet level prairie yu'd git a good start back if they did show up."

By mid-afternoon our two wagons under Herb Lane got about five miles from town. Four men working in relays dug a post hole in short order. Shaw rode on one side and Lowden on the other and they ranged a mile and sometimes two miles ahead of us or to either side, scouting for the possible approach of Indians.

The afternoon was very hot and sultry. I labored without even a shirt and the sweat ran off my brown body. Darnell, except when he was driving from one post hole to another, stood up on his driver's seat, searching the horizon with his field glass. None of us workers bothered to scan the prairie, but there were none of us who did not expect something to happen before the sun set.

So we were all prepared for Dar-

nell's ringing shout: "Injuns! Off there to the west! Pile in, for we're gonna have a race!"

While he and Lane were turning the mule teams back toward camp we threw our tools into the wagons and leaping aboard, took up our rifles and cartridge belts. By that time the drivers had the big wagons rolling along at a lively clip.

There were four men in each wagon and the extra men in our vehicle were Edney and Cliff Nelson, hardy Missourians. Neither of these wagons was canvas-covered and it was with tremendous excitement that I scanned the prairie to our rear. I saw clouds of dusts puffing up but still no horsemen.

"Tom, are you sure you saw something?" I queried.

"Shore as hell," responded Tom grimly, as he hauled back on the reins. "These pesky mules wanta run an' mebbe that's gonna be good."

Then I saw Shaw on his red horse flashing across the gray prairie and behind him, I could not tell how far, a group of wild riders. They were silhouetted black against the horizon line. Tails and manes streaked out in the wind. It was a breath-taking sight. Then I switched my gaze around toward the river and espied Lowden tearing down toward us.

I searched the river bottom and the plain behind him for signs of possible foes, but there were none. Then I shifted my gaze back toward Shaw. I was astounded to see that the Indians had changed their course and were making directly for the two wagons. And it did not take a moment to see how rapidly they were gaining. Shaw, too, had turned toward us.

We three men in the second wagon gripped our rifles and watched with strained eyes and waited for the attack that would soon close in around us. The trail road was fairly good and except for ruts here and there we rolled on with the mules at a gallop. Lane must have been letting his mules go for his wagon drew a little ahead of ours.

Lowden had crossed the trail and was heading to join Shaw, who had cut across to come between the Indians and the wagons.

"Look! Smoke!" shouted Edney, pointing. "The ball's opened!"

Puffs of white smoke arose above the group of Indians and my keen sight picked up smaller puffs of dust where the bullets struck far behind the cowboys.

How long that rear-end chase kept up without any material change, except nearer approach of all the horsemen to the wagons, I could not accurately judge. It seemed to be very long but probably was short. When the cowboys were some few hundred yards in our rear and the Indians perhaps a quarter of a mile farther out, all riders again changed their course. The Indians swerved off to our right in single file. Shaw and Lowden likewise swerved and took a course parallel with ours.

I counted 14 Indian riders in that long line, and now they drew close enough for us to see their color and all the physical aspects of mustang and rider in their wild detail. Some of them had bows and arrows but most of them were armed with rifles. They kept shooting. I marveled at the way they were able to reload riding along at that pace. Still the cowboys withheld their fire but it was not until the savages drew parallel with us

and began to come closer that they shot.

All at once the mustangs appeared to be riderless. I rubbed my eyes. Then I saw that each Indian rider had slipped down on the offside of his mustang and was riding at that swift pace with only one leg in sight and that was over the back of his mustang. They presented no target at all. And as they forged ahead of us they also drew closer. The cowboys rode between them and the wagons and it was evident that they intended to keep on doing so.

Then the Indians were shooting from under the necks of their ponies and I saw bullets whip up the dust in front of the cowboys, showing that the Indians had gotten within range. The perilous time for the cowboys had arrived, if not quite for us. Darnell had let the mules have their heads and they had almost caught up with the wagon in front. We now could plainly see Julesburg and the big group of wagons filling the spaces between the houses. We were hardly two miles distant.

The Indians came close enough for me to see dark heads and arms under the horses' necks. In that position they were firing. At that juncture the men on the wagon ahead of us opened with a volley. It was futile so far as we could see. The Indians were plainly bent on circling around us and as they kept on, the cowboys maintained their place between them and the wagons, at the same time always drawing somewhat closer to us. The savages crossed the trail and circled around on the river side, passed beyond and behind us, then crossed the trail again to take up their former position on our right except that they were closer.

Presently my sensibilities were tightened at sight of Shaw leveling his rifle. Frightened as I was, I could not help reveling in the picture he and his horse made. He did not shoot quickly. But when he let go, I saw an Indian pony pitch headlong, flinging a dark savage form to roll ahead of him. I heard the ringing crack of Lowden's rifle sounding above the reports of the Indians' guns but I could not unrivet my gaze from Shaw at that moment. He shot again and again. One more mustang went down and in the next three shots another. Then as I counted the Indian riders I saw that four were missing and I knew that Lowden had accounted for one. The savages swerved again then, to draw out of the range of the cowboys' fire and to cease shooting, though continuing to run parallel with us.

"Wal, they'd shore have cooked our goose if it hadn't been for the cowboys," shouted Edney. "We'll make it on in now. Hello! What's goin' on there in town?"

"Injun attack," yelled Darnell. "There's a whole mob of them. If they see us drivin' in it'll be Katy-bar-the-door with us."

But as we drew closer it was evident that the engagement, luckily for us, centered on the far side of the town. Through the dust and smoke I could discern Indian mustangs dashing to and fro, but I did not see a soldier or any of our men.

With the mules at a furious gallop we made the remaining distance into

town before our Indian pursuers could join the main body and have us cut off. As we entered the bare circle before the town Shaw and Lowden raced up to us.

We held on for dear life until Darnell halted with a tremendous jerk and I half leaped and was half thrown to the ground. Then a hideous uproar assailed my ears, an infernal chorus of piercing Indian yells punctured by volleys of rifle shots.

Out of the dust and the smoke Liligh appeared with fire in his eye, his face begrimed with powder, and with a bloody streak on the side of his head. "Somebody unhitch while the rest of yu stand guard," he roared above the din. "Turn the mules loose. Look after yer hawsses. Fight from behind yer wagon or inside. Look sharp fer there's a million Indians on the other side."

"Rustle this job, boys," shouted Shaw, standing with rifle in one hand and the bridle of his horse in the other. "I'll look for Ruby."

The tasks indicated were done in a twinkling. The seven of us hid behind the two wagons and peered out on each side with cocked rifles ready. I became aware of an intermittent rifle fire, sometimes in heavy volleys and then again in scattered reports.

With our backs to the last house and the wagons in front of us, we peered out looking for a redskin to shoot at. There did not appear to be any on that side. I noted shiny streaks coming out of the smoke to strike the earth, and then the quivering objects turn into Indian arrows half imbedded in the ground.

In a few moments Shaw rejoined us, looking terribly concerned. "Ruby's not in our wagon," he said hoarsely, close to my ear. "I reckon, of course, she must be in one of the houses. Didn't see any soldiers and only a few of our men."

"What'll we do?" shouted Lowden, as he and Darnell joined us.

"Do! Keep hid here an' blaze way at any redskin thet shows himself."

All of a sudden a screeching mob of redskins appeared to rise up out of the dust and smoke and dart here and there, some with rifles at their shoulders, others with drawn bows, and some with tomahawks.

I heard my comrades firing and I began trying to get a bead on this redskin and that one. I knew I missed several before I hit one. As he crumpled into the dirt and jerked spasmodically I let out an involuntary yell. On the instant there came a ring against the wagon wheel and then, with a shock of agony, I saw an arrow with its head buried in my thigh. Instinctively I grasped it and pulled it out. It came easily and the arrow head was covered with blood. It had hit me after glancing off the tire.

I knelt low and peering from behind the wagon bed I shot at every Indian I could get a bead on. There was a steady, continuous rifle fire from behind our two wagons. There were fallen Indians all over the ground behind that part of the barricade. I saw the rest of them dart and glide out of sight in the smoke round toward the other side of the town from which most of the yelling and firing came.

There came a period then in which all these sounds of battle augmented and swelled to one tremendous point and then suddenly diminished so that only the hoarse shouts of white men and the bang of their rifles continued. We waited there strung behind our

barricade, peering out, ready for anything.

"Pards, they've been drove off," shouted Shaw.

"Men, they've taken to their hosses, packin' their cripples," yelled Edney, from the other wagon. "If we haven't got some men hurt or mebbe killed, it'll be funny."

"Hurt!" ejaculated Lowden. "What you call thet arrow stickin' in my laig? An' I stopped a bullet, but it must have glanced an' hit me, 'cause I can feel it under the skin."

"Never touched me," returned Shaw. And then I looked to see his rifle on the ground and that he was reloading his two guns.

We ventured forth and warily looked about. I saw Edney knock an Indian on the head as he was trying to rise from the ground. Here and there lay other savages. With the cessation of the firing the dust and smoke clouds began to blow away and soon we could distinguish the houses and the barricades of wagons between them. Soldiers appeared, and members of our laboring crew. They all held guns and appeared to be looking for Indians still alive. We joined them and met Liligh.

"How about yu, men? You don't look hurt much."

"I reckon we missed the worst of it," said Shaw.

"It was short but bad all the time. The redskins charged the store fust of all an' I'll bet we'll find bloody work done there."

"Liligh, did you see anythin' of our boy Pedro?" queried Shaw, sharply.

"Yup. Shore I did. But jest at the minnit I forgit where."

"Whose were those wagons I saw makin' for the river as we came up?"

"They belong to a wagon train thet jest come in before the attack. I asked them to form their wagons in line an' fight it out with us an' thet's the last I saw of them."

"Wal, they rustled for the river. I seen them just as we reached the town."

Liligh said the Indians had charged the southern end of the line of wagons and houses. Fifteen soldiers had been killed, most of them in or around the trading-store, and five of Creighton's men, one of them belonging to our crew. The retreating Indians had carried away all of their cripples and most of their dead men. A messenger came from Creighton asking us to come to him in the Pony Express station. He had been shot in the shoulder. He greeted us with a grim mien.

"Boys, I'm sorry we ran into this," he said. "Cameron, I see you've been hurt because you're all bloody. If you're able to navigate it'll be a busy time for you."

"Boss, mine is only a scratch," I assured him. "Soon as I get my things and tie it up, I'll tend to you."

"I'll wait," replied our leader. "There are men hurt far worse than I am. Take care of them first."

I ran around to our wagon and called for Ruby but received no response. I climbed aboard to find the wagon empty. I smeared some antiseptic on my wound, and tying it up tightly and buckling my belt, I reached for my kit. There on the floor of the wagon was a note. I picked it up. It was addressed to Shaw. I hurried over to where he was standing with Tom and Jack.

"Here," I exclaimed, "this is for you."

He read it quickly and turned ash-

en white. "Here—Pard Wayne, you read it—to the boys." His voice broke and he walked away.

Slowly, with grieving voice, I began. *"Vance: I couldn't marry you today like you asked. I should have told you before. I was already married. So I have left with a wagon train. Good-by, Ruby."*

Chapter Nine

Startling Silhouette

NOT improbably I would have suffered severely from the wound in my hip, and from a sickening revulsion in reaction to the shedding of human blood, had it not been for the cardinal necessity of my taking care of the injured. Even my great distress over the disappearance of Ruby and my sorrow for Shaw yielded to that.

I had two seriously wounded men. It did not seem possible to save Jenkins, one of the teamsters, as he had been shot through the middle. The other man, who was suffering from a severed artery, I managed to help.

I stopped in the telegraph shack to see if the operator was wounded and he gave me some bad news that he had received over the military telegraph of a west-bound wagon train that had been attacked by the Indians 25 miles out of Julesburg. This wagon train, having been warned of a possible attack, had secured a military escort.

Knowing this, the Indians had assembled there a band several times larger in number than the whites, and before the Indians were finally beaten off, many soldiers and citizens were killed. The survivors had retreated to the military post, which was only about two miles distant, where they established communication with Julesburg and the outer world.

When daylight came it was not possible for me to overlook the dead savages that were lying all over the place. Naked, gory, malignantly fierce in death, they presented a ghastly sight. During the morning Kinney had the corpses carried out on the prairie for burial. The remainder of that day, I went my rounds without food and with scarcely any drink until I felt assured that I had done all that was possible for my patients.

When about dusk I staggered back to our wagon, I was almost ready to collapse. Tom and Jack took off my boots and put me to bed, redressed my wound which had become inflamed, and gave me a hot drink. During the following period while I was half out of my head, one or both of them stayed beside me all the while.

I fell asleep at last and did not awaken until late the next morning. Then, outside of a stiff and very sore hip, I seemed to be all right. I asked for news.

"Wal, there ain't a hell of a lot," offered Lowden. "The opinion is thet the redskin attack was against Creighton an' his construction work. The telegraph line is down east of heah but thet will be repaired by today or tonight an' then Creighton can telegraph. The best news was the return of the wagon train thet was sent out three days ago," went on Lowden ponderingly, "all except Beal an' two wagons with three or four men. Wainwright is in with four wagons full of

poles, an' you'd think Creighton never had any back-set atall."

"But shouldn't someone ride out there and look for Beal?" I asked.

"Shore as shootin'," returned the cowboy. "Me an' Tom an' Vance are about to saddle up an' rustle, that is, if you don't want one of us to stay with you."

I assured them that I was quite all right. I made the rounds of my patients once more, to find that after all I had not been such a bad doctor.

Toward the end of the afternoon the cowboys returned, their horses dusty and caked with froth. Tom was the first one to come over to our wagon and I did not need to ask him about the fate of Beal's men. Shaw's narrow slits of eyes still showed the lightning of his fiery spirit, but he was not silent.

He said, "We found Beal's wagons burned to black skeletons, but we only found three men, all naked, scalped, and mutilated. The other man must have got away, at least from the wagons, but he shore must have been followed an' killed. We couldn't find out."

Next morning we rode out under Creighton's strict orders, four wagon trains strong, minus the men we had lost, and several brace of oxen. We had not lost a mule. There was some grumbling on the part of the men but the few who were badly hurt were put in the bunk wagon and the others, crippled or not, went at the work as if nothing had happened. By noon we had poles up five miles out of Julesburg beyond the point where we had been surprised by the Indians.

We camped that night for the last time on the banks of the South Platte River. From there the trail was to head northwest back into Nebraska following Lodge Pole Creek.

One of the two wagons destroyed by the Indians had been full of supplies, and we had to go on rations. We would soon have recourse to pemmican, made of buffalo meat thoroughly dried and ground into a powder and kept in bags of skin. When served mixed with flour and boiled, it made a wholesome dish and one that I liked. But we were not concerned at being put upon rather slim rations for we knew that very soon the buffalo would catch up with us.

Before we left the big river Liligh had us fill all the barrels and water bags and other receptacles that would hold water, and asked us to make sparing use of it until we had crossed the badlands.

Some miles from the river, on rising ground above the creek bed, we got into the most barren country we had yet seen. There was a scant growth of sage and the most meager buffalo grass we had encountered. We did not find any water until the third day out from the South Platte, and we were not able to make more than three or four miles a day.

One day we were visited by a group of Indians. They were serious but not unfriendly. Liligh said they were Sioux, which tribe had not openly gone on the war path at that time. They had a fine type of chieftain named Black Hawk. He was intelligent and somber and knew a few words of English. He, like his band, became absorbed in the sounds of the telegraph.

Black Hawk was apparently certain that Creighton could invoke the power of the Great Spirit to send words through the air and he was

strong in his assurance that the Sioux tribe would protect the telegraph line. He would send word to all the tribes that the White Chief meant no harm with his line of poles and wires across the plains and that they should protect it.

From that day as we progressed along the trail we always had Indians with us. They guided us to water or told us where we could find it, and that meant much where sources were few and separated by weary miles and hot, blistering days. Sometimes we had to give the oxen a drink out of a bucket, to save them from parching and falling in their tracks.

A Pony Express rider reached us from the West with most disquieting news. Sunderlund with his wagon train had stopped to fight off Indians. Also he sent word back by the rider that half of his herd of cattle, instead of having been stampeded by Indians, had been run off by rustlers who had followed him all the way from Texas.

One evening after we had made camp, we were sitting around trying to keep cool when Lowden told us that Sunderlund's wagon train was only about eight miles off.

"Well, Wayne," said Darnell, "I reckon you'll be ridin' out that way tonight, no doubt, to talk to Mr. Sunderlund."

"If you do speak to Sunderlund," Jack broke in, "be sure to give my regards to his daughter."

Shaw had been quiet, but suddenly he motioned me to one side. "Wayne," he said, "you just ain't goin' to see Kit Sunderlund."

"Can it possibly be that you're intending to call upon her yourself?" I asked.

"No!" Without another word, Shaw walked over to saddle up his horse.

I strolled over to him, my anger somewhat subsiding. "Vance, you're probably the best friend I have in the world. How about going for a ride with me tonight?"

"No, Wayne, I've got to do a little scoutin'. So long." He leaped astride and wheeled away.

It was a most beautiful night and very calm. But to me it was a night of utter distress. I could not bring myself to think that Shaw would actually go to see Kit after refusing to go with me. My brain welled around, but through the confusion one single thought came out. And that was that I was heading that moment straight for Kit Sunderlund and that her bitter accusation was as if it had never been.

Lowden told me how to find the Sunderlund camp, and soon I was riding along a slight swell between two draws. I intended to declare myself once and for all. If there was no hope for me with this high-spirited Texas girl, I wanted to hear it myself.

The point where I reached the Sunderlund wagon train was at the end of the small ridge I had been following. I picked out Kit's wagon home and gave the horse his head.

Kit's wagon had been unhitched under a spreading cottonwood, somewhat apart from the others, yet not on the outskirts of the camp. As I neared it I heard voices. Then to my utter amazement and chagrin I saw Vance Shaw's horse standing, reins dragging, at the rear of the wagon. And silhouetted against the fire stood the tall cowboy, with Kit against his breast.

They seemed entranced with the moment. Ordinarily Vance would

have heard Wingfoot within a quarter of a mile. Sitting there on my horse I knew that what I should do was ride away as quickly as possible. But a feeling I could not control made me burst upon them. Speaking furiously and without allowing either of them to interrupt me, I accused Shaw of lying to me.

Before he could reply I turned to Kit. "Vance and I were friends, Miss Sunderlund. And I entertained hopes that—hopes that you would not understand."

As Wingfoot plunged away, I heard Vance's startled entreaty: "Pard Wayne—wait!" But I kept on.

CHAPTER TEN

Shaw Sniffs and Listens

WE STOPPED one day, at an hour when the heat was most intense, within sight of the famous Chimney Rock, which was one of the most eagerly sought landmarks along the Oregon Trail. It was situated not far from the Wyoming line. It was a dim, spectral, chimney-shaped shaft of rock rising above the haze of the horizon to pierce the sky. It was between 50 and 60 miles away.

Creighton's wagon trains were stalled. For the first time they could not go on. The men were exhausted from hard work in the broiling heat and starved from a meager diet which lacked meat, and so thirsty they spat cotton. Their lips were blistered, their cheeks peeling, their eyes seared from peering through hot air. The oxen and mules had been two days without a drink and there was only a little water left to slake the thirst of the men.

Creighton sent for Liligh and the cowboys and several of the Westerners. "Men," he addressed us, "I have made the decisions on this trek across the plains. I have taken the responsibility. I realize that we are stuck here momentarily, hourly, perhaps for longer, but my mind simply cannot accept that we *can't* go on! I say, *carry on*, and, of course, that is what we will do. But for the time being, what?"

"Boss, we can't go back an' we can't go forward," returned Liligh. "We hev reached our limit. To push the oxen an' mules any further without water would make them strangle in their tracks. If it doesn't rain—"

"Don't say *if*," thundered our chief. "How many times have I told you to say *when*? Shaw, with all due respect to the older Westerners, I'm leaving it up to you."

"Wal, sir, as I see it, I reckon we should stay put, as Liligh thinks. Boss, you may not believe me, but I can smell rain."

"Smell rain?" queried Creighton incredulously.

"Yes, sir, I can," returned the cowboy, his voice strong and vibrant. "I always could smell rain an' I can now. Thet sense of mine has never failed me. I've lived all my life in the open. An' I can smell rain now."

"You encourage me, cowboy. Men, here we stop until something happens. Unhitch and make the animals and yourselves as comfortable as possible."

While Darnell and I unhitched the drooping oxen and turned them loose, Shaw and Lowden relieved the three horses of their saddles and led them

into the shade of the wagon. Then we all sought some point where the burning sun could not get to us.

While watching the south for some sign, however small, of a change in the weather, my thoughts drifted to that night when my world had crashed about me. It had been finding Shaw there, his seeming betrayal of the close friendship between us, that had rocked my equilibrium. What had he meant when he called for me to wait?

We had never spoken of it since. I had seen Shaw looking at me peculiarly many times during the days that ensued. But he said nothing and it was impossible for me to broach the subject. As far as an outward relationship was concerned, we had conducted ourselves as if nothing had happened.

This afternoon was different from any I remembered. There was an oppression in the air. The stillness of that vast prairie was something appalling. What had appeared to be heat haze in the south gradually took on the form of clouds. They could not be seen to move, yet they spread up over the sky. The atmosphere became a thick, rich amber. Muttering thunder began faintly and far away, and rumbled along the sky until it almost reached us.

"Pard, as shore as God made little apples, we're in for one of those turrible electric storms," said Shaw to Lowden.

"I don't care what it does," said Darnell. "Storms are bad in Wyomin', yes, but I'd rather be struck by lightnin' than strangled from thirst."

"Ha!" exclaimed Shaw, rising in one motion to his tall height. "You all see what I see?"

Lowden had been his shadow in action and he burst out, "Injuns, by damn! An' a whole bunch of 'em. Now what the hell air they up to?"

"Up to? Cain't you see?" snorted Shaw. "They're ridin' along under the wire, tryin' to make up their minds just where they're goin' to do some dirty work."

Finding the field glass, I went forward to stand on the driver's seat. Liligh came running along the line of wagons.

"Hey, men," he yelled, "a gang of redskins out hyar up to some mischief. Creighton says to let them do what they damn please. We can't take on a fight now. No shootin' unless they should happen to charge us. Stretch tarpaulins an' any extra canvas from wagon to wagon to ketch the rain."

"Wal, my Yankee pard, cain't you tell us what you see?" went on Shaw.

"Must be about forty or fifty Indians, maybe more," I rejoined. "You can see now. They've stopped about a half a mile away just at the curve of the telegraph line before it turns up this way. They don't look like any Indians I've seen before, surely not Sioux or Arapahoes."

"If they're Crows we can look for dirty business," said Darnell. "But I reckon we're not in for a fight."

"I think I see a chief haranguing that bunch," I went on. "They've gathered around him in a circle. . . . A lot of them have dismounted from their mustangs. They are shaking the telegraph pole. . . . Whoopee! They're dragging the poles and wire down. I can see them chopping at the wire with tomahawks. There! They've got the wire down at that point. Indians riding back like the wind along the line. They're followed by another

bunch, pushing over the poles as they go along. Looks to me as if they were knocking the insulators off. . . . Say, boys, way down beyond there's another bunch of Indians. I hadn't seen them. They are a mile away and working away from the telegraph line. . . . They're dragging the telegraph line with them—some of them are on foot leading their mustangs and hanging on to the wire."

"I reckon the pore damn ninnies hev got it into their heads thet if they cut out a mile chunk of wire an' march off with it, it'll keep us from gettin' the Great Spirit to send more messages," commented Lowden.

Presently there was a long line of Indians, some mounted and others on foot, stretched along fully a mile of wire and dragging it over the prairie somewhat to the north. I wondered what Creighton was thinking about a mile of his telegraph line having been cut out and dragged away.

A loud clap of thunder disrupted my attention and lowering the field glass I saw that the clouds now were moving on us and they were very low. The center was inky-black and the rolling prairie land this side of it was obscured by a gray moving wall of rain. Others who had observed this before I did were rushing to stretch tarpaulins between the wagons.

Suddenly there came a dazzling, blinding stroke of lightning, followed immediately by an ear-splitting crash of thunder. A blinding, dazzling, white-and-blue bolt of lightning ran along the ground with incredible swiftness, leaving a wake of electric sparks. The lightning had struck the telegraph wire that the Indians were dragging.

For an instant the lurid white light obscured the line of savages. When it cleared I saw that they had been knocked flat. The riderless mustangs were wildly running across the plain. For a moment I wondered if the Indians had all been killed, but then I saw them, one after another, rising up out of the grass, to grope here and there, to come to their senses and flee across the prairie like frightened quail.

Shaw's rolling laughter rang out. "Pards, what you make of thet? The Great Spirit pitched a lightnin' bolt into thet telegraph wire the redskins were stealin'!"

"The Lord is shore with Creighton," yelled Lowden.

"Here comes the storm, boys," shrieked Shaw, "an' she'll shore be a humdinger."

Then on the instant the sky appeared to rain streaks of lightning, and balls of fire seemed to rise from the ground where the lightning had struck and bounce over the prairie for all the world like huge blazing-white cottonballs. The splitting crack of ropes of lightning, the crash and boom of thunder, the terrific glittering brightness that illumined the scene, the pungent odor of brimstone, and envelopment of all in weird unreality, and a cataclysm of sound that became deafening—these caused me to fall upon the driver's seat and cling there half stricken, all my senses strained beyond their limit.

It was almost dark as night but the flashes of lightning were so thick that it seemed dazzlingly bright and duskily dark almost at the same time. I could see part of the roped-off corral where the men had put the mules. Incredible as it seemed, I ac-

tually saw balls of electric fire run up and down the backs of those mules, play up and down their short manes, and drop off their ears.

The black cloud had almost reached us. Darnell came running to me and shouted something in my ear which I did not hear. But as he leaped into our wagon, I had sense enough to follow suit. In another moment the electric storm had passed on and the rain clouds, reaching us on the wings of the wind, burst over us.

Shaw and Lowden were lying on their bunks calmly smoking cigarettes; Darnell sat on his bed and I knelt at the end of the wagon peering out. If anybody spoke I didn't notice. I had the feeling that I could not hear myself think.

The solid downpour lasted less than half an hour; the gray pall passed on, and it grew light again. We emerged from the wagon to find all the men and the soldiers in action. Our camp was on high ground but there were inches of water everywhere. In the wash below us that had been dry there roared a muddy current. Every tarpaulin that had been stretched between the wagons was sagging full of water. Some distance off to the left of camp the oxen were drinking at the little pools and runnels, and even beginning to graze off the sparse vegetation.

"Wal, who's the plumb best prophet about this wagon train?" drawled Shaw.

"Pard, yo're purty good but yo're lucky," observed Lowden. "You know damn well you told all thet stuff to Creighton to keep up his nerve."

"Here come Creighton and Liligh," I said. "I'll bet two-bits he'll put us to work digging post holes."

"Take you up, pard. It's past mid-afternoon now, an' look down the desert to the southward about ten miles."

"What! By gum, if it ain't a wagon train," ejaculated Lowden.

"Jack, yore eyes are pore, except mayhe for girls. Thet's two wagon trains."

They were indeed a welcome sight to me. And I rejoiced at the realization that Creighton's fortunes had again risen.

Camp was a busy place late that afternoon. Creighton gave orders to slaughter two of the oxen that had been crippled and which threatened to be a drag on our progress. There was promise of fresh meat for several days but the problem of firewood still confronted us.

Next morning bright and early the telegraph construction was in full sway again. Every day Chimney Rock stood up in the distance, seemingly no closer. The work along this stretch was probably the most strenuous that we had encountered.

There came another warm sultry day during which we made unusually good progress. That evening we had a better campfire than usual. We really did not need it because the air was much milder and without the usual nipping edge. We all sat around the glowing embers of our fire, not very talkative. I was not able to resist the encroaching of a memory that seemed an endless time back in the past. I did not forget Kit Sunderlund. Several times we had heard of Sunderlund's wagon train somewhere to the west of us.

All at once I observed Shaw turn his ear to the southward and become still as a stone. He got up and walked

away from us almost out of the circle of light. But I could discern him standing sideways, bending over a little, and surely strained in his listening.

"What the hell?" whispered Jack, sitting up and removing his cigarette.

"Vance must be hearin' somethin'," interposed Darnell, in the same low tone. "He shore is listenin'."

We maintained our stiff postures, the three of us intently watching Shaw. All at once he broke out of his motionless statuelike tensity and ran back to us.

"Buffalo!" he announced, and his voice rang. "It's a stampede shore as God made little apples. We're right in line!"

"What!" I ejaculated. "Buffalo? Stampede?"

"Air you shore, pard?" queried Lowden.

"Shore as hell. I heard it long before I made shore we were in line. Cameron, you run an' fetch Liligh. Jack, you an' Tom bring in the oxen. I'll rustle the hawsses."

I ran off in search of Liligh. I found him at his wagon, squatting with his crew around a little campfire and I announced breathlessly, "Boss, come with me at once. Shaw wants you pronto."

"Me?" ejaculated the plainsman, making a wry face, but he was quick to get up and let me lead him away.

"Boss, Shaw hears buffalo. He said it was a stampede and that our camp was right in line."

"Dernation!" exclaimed Liligh. "Thet is somethin'. I'd hoped thet main herd hed missed us."

In a very few moments we reached our wagon to find Shaw tethering the three horses to the wheels. When he saw us he said, "Liligh, I'm afeard I hear a hell's slew of buffalo in stampede. But you hustle out there away from camp an' turn yore ear south."

Liligh strode swiftly out into the darkness. I followed him, but to one side, and when I got out there alone in the dark I turned my ear to the south and tried to stop all the internal workings of my being to listen. But listen though I might with all my power I could not hear anything unusual.

Presently when Liligh hurried back to the campfire I ran to join him. Shaw looked up from his task and I saw his eyes glint reflections from the fire.

"Damn the luck!" burst out the foreman. "Right! When was you ever wrong, you dod-gasted Texas Injun? It's a stampede all right an' if I ain't fooled, thar air steen million buffs in thet herd."

"I reckon so. We just got time to make ready for them."

"Shaw, of course I've met with lots of stampedes," went on Liligh hurriedly. "But what's yer idee? Spill it quick."

"Only one idee. Tell Creighton an' alarm the camp. Rustle up the oxen an' mules. Form the wagons in a wedge. Sharp point to the front. Haul two of the oldest wagons ahead. Have buckets of oil ready to throw on them. Send two men from each wagon to the front with rifles an' plenty of shells. Order two men left in each wagon to try to hold the stock. You know the rest. Rustle!"

Liligh ran away shouting. There soon followed a tremendous activity in camp, hoarse voices, tramp of boots, metallic rattle of harness, men running out on to the prairie with

lanterns, yelling to each other, the advent of Lowden and Darnell with our oxen, the scrape and grind of wheels, and presently in what seemed to me record time the wagons were being moved, some hauled and pushed by a dozen men, others pulled by mules, and the encroachment on camp of many oxen.

Shaw presently yelled in my ear, "Grab yore rifle. Fill yore pockets with shells. Come with me. Jack an' Tom will try to hold our stock!" He gave some final instructions to Tom and Jack, then he whirled away with me at his heels.

Most of these men and the soldiers knew what a buffalo stampede meant; many of them had seen one. They worked with the desperation of men in peril. At the back of the wide wedge formed by the wagons they were leaving a deep space, evidently for the cattle and mules. Oxen were being driven in from both sides.

Men and soldiers armed with rifles and shotguns were forging to the front in twos and threes and all of them were talking in hoarsely excited voices. For all I could judge in the darkness, the wedge of wagons when it was completed would be at least 100 yards long. At length we reached the front of the triangle. The point was two wagons wide and that arrangement held good for two lines back. Then the width was increased to three wagons and so on to four and more until the triangle spread wide at the far end. Fifty feet out from the point of the wedge stood two huge white canvas-covered wagons. I saw men passing with buckets and I smelled kerosene.

There were fully 50 men and soldiers congregated at that point. While they talked they all faced the prairie and no doubt they were all listening as keenly as I was.

Shaw indicated for me to follow him. We left the crowd of men and proceeded to the two wagons that were to be set on fire. We walked ahead 50 steps and then stopped. The instant we froze in our tracks I heard a strange low incessant rumble somewhat resembling the rolling of distant thunder and for me, surely, a heart-stopping sound.

"Hear thet?" queried Shaw. "I shore miscalculated. Them buffalo were farther away an' a damn sight more in number than I figured. They're runnin' wild, stampedin' full tilt! Lay down an' put yore ear to the ground. I'll go back an' tell the men to throw the oil on the wagons an' be ready to set fire pronto."

I did as the cowboy bade me, and removing my sombrero I laid my face close to the ground and pressed my ear to the sand. It seemed as if I had put my ear to a colossal sea shell, and was hearing that strange sound of the sea.

I tried to judge whether or not the sound was increasing and in a few seconds I decided that both volume and rumble were accelerating. Shaw returned and touched me with his boot, and I arose.

When I turned back to follow Shaw the two oil-soaked wagons burst into flames and a great space all around us was brightly lighted. The faces of the men were no longer dark. Bareheaded and pale-faced, with burning eyes fixed on the prairie, they looked

only in the one direction. Shaw herded them back even with the point of the wedge and lined them up on each side just in the lee of the two front wagons. If the herd split around these obstacles the buffalo would pass on each side of the men and of the wedge. If not—! Shaw lined me up beside him on the inside and he faced forward rifle ready, with a shout that strangely sounded like a whisper:

"Shoot when I shoot an' keep on shootin'!"

I knew, because his voice sounded so faintly, that the stampede was almost upon us, but I actually did not hear anything on the instant. I peered ahead, transfixed, with my feet riveted to the ground, sure that I was about to live the supreme moment of my life.

Then out there on the moonlit prairie I saw something. It moved. It was black. It was like the torrential flow of an ocean behind which there were unknown leagues of pushing waves. The fire, catching the top of the canvas wagons, flared up brighter. That oncoming wave swallowed up the moonlit space. Then I recognized the shaggy front of a buffalo herd in stampede. It had a straight front and extended as far as I could see on both sides, and surely for miles and miles.

I became aware that I was rocking on my feet. The ground was shaking under me. I was deafened. There was no sound. I knew there was no sound because when Shaw raised his rifle in a signal for us all to fire there was no report following the belching of red flame and smoke. Even reports of all the heavy guns in unison could not be heard.

Shaking as one with the palsy, I imitated Shaw and rapidly emptied my rifle straight into the front of this rebounding black juggernaut with its myriad of shiny horns and fiery green eyes. But shaking though I was, unsteady on my pins, I could shoot and I could see.

And suddenly the center of that advancing line sustained a staggering shock and disintegrated, huge black shaggy forms hurdling high to fall and slide and others as if by magic taking their places until the augmenting pile encroached upon the burning wagons, bumping them to send aloft showers of sparks from the burning canvas. My heart almost stopped beating until it became certain that the buffalo herd had split and the rolling black sea of the stampede was passing on to each side of us.

Seeing Shaw reload his rifle, I did likewise with fingers that were all thumbs. His rifle was blazing flame before I had finished reloading. We were in the thick of something so supremely terrible that I became an automaton, reacting like a machine. I shot methodically, regulating my shooting and reloading to Shaw and the other men. My eyes were assailed by a fury of action, a maelstrom of churning buffalo, endless and boundless.

The bright flare of the burning wagons died down. Only the wagon beds were blazing. A column of smoke rolled aloft a few yards to merge into the solid canopy of dust. The huge pile of buffalo on each side of the wagons grew apace to right and left, widening the barricade of dead bodies in front of our wedge.

The trembling of the earth under my feet began to lessen. The men had

ceased shooting. The dust clouds seemed thinner. The hideous streaming black nightmare on each side of us had passed by, the earth between my feet ceased to rock and became solid again, the dust clouds roared away as if sucked into vacuum created by the moving herd. The stampede was over.

Shaw's clutch of steel fingers was hard on my arm. "Wal, pard, it was kinda tough to have to weather a stampede like thet. I reckon yore eye-teeth are cut shore, this time. I'm proud of you, pard. Wal, there will be buffalo rump steak aplenty from now on."

Half an hour later the irrepressible among our workmen were broiling buffalo rump steaks over the burning remains of our two wagons. They made a sort of hilarious occasion of it.

But none of our party joined them. I dragged myself to bed, asleep before I got under the blanket. I didn't awaken or dream that night, and Tom had to prod me the next morning to route me out. I smelled the savory rump steak and even that did not accelerate my motions.

Immediately after eating I strode over to take a look at the scene of the battle. There was an enormous pile of the buffalo in front of the wagon wedge. Five or more deep in the center and sloping away to each side! It was apparent that neither the burning wagons nor the rifle fire would have been sufficient to split the herd without the insurmountable obstacle of the pile of dead buffalo.

Some of the workmen were taking advantage of the opportunity to obtain buffalo hides and I hired two men, who said they were butchering several corpses to take along with us, to get two fine hides for me.

"Wal, it looks sorta as if the buffs played hell with our telegraph poles," observed Lowden.

"More'n two days' job of repair, as far as I see," returned Shaw.

"I hope we are detailed to stay behind and put up those poles," I said.

"Ump-ummm," rejoined Shaw, shaking his head. "The boss will want us out in front."

Liligh left a crew of three wagons and a dozen men at that camp to make the repairs and catch up with us with the buffalo meat and hides. The rest of us were ordered to get ready to advance.

"Pard, somethin' funny happened last night," said Darnell to me. "It happened after you fell asleep. We fellers all heard it an' were shore tickled. Creighton came over our way lookin' for Liligh an' when he found him he bellered: 'Liligh, take some men an' go out an' see how many telegraph poles are down.'

"Liligh was sittin' by the fire over there, dog-tired as anyone could see, an' at the boss' order he jumped as if somebody had stuck him.

" 'Boss, what the hell fer?' he yelled. 'Thar won't be any less poles down now than thar will be in the mornin' when mebbe thar'll be more.'

" 'I want to know how many,' roared the boss.

" 'Wal, Mr. Creighton, I just don't know how we're gonna find out tonight,' said Liligh, very quiet an' cool. 'It'd be much as my life is worth.'

" 'I hired you an' every last man of you to work any time or all night if necessary,' went on the chief, an' he shore was riled. 'When we get farther along this trail we won't have

any rest atall, day or night.'

" 'Yes, thar will be, Boss. Some of us will be restin' peaceful like in our graves on the lone prairee.'

"That must have socked the boss where he lives 'cause he choked an' strangled an' glared like a wild man an' then went back to his wagon."

"Gosh, Tom, he sure is a slave-driver," I replied, emphatically. "But I suppose he has vision that is denied the rest of us. It must take such a man to do such a job as this."

"Aw, the boss is grand," returned Darnell.

By the time we were under way, wagon trains stretched across the plain, all with work to do and doing it effectively. Scattered strings and groups of buffalo leisurely caught up with us, paying no particular attention to us and passing on their way. They were, no doubt, the stragglers from the main herd.

Tom and I were in the last wagon, and while Tom drove on, stopping from post to post, I got out to drive the sharpened spikes into the telegraph poles. I had noted more than one buffalo bull sidle up to a pole and look at it curiously. And on more than one occasion when I saw a buffalo rub himself against one of our poles, I remembered the wagon train left behind us to make repairs and I ceased to worry.

Day by day the work progressed fairly well along this stretch and we began to approach Chimney Rock. All the time we were climbing the prairie, and now the ascent was perceptible.

Straggling groups of buffalo passed us every day. The desert had taken on a fresh green color. Water was still plentiful in the swales and hardly a day passed that we did not have to ford a stream.

Toward evening at the close of a good day's progress Liligh halted us to make camp near a water hole. As supper was not yet ready, I walked out a way to see what I could observe of the buffalo through my glasses. I was electrified to find them playing havoc with our telegraph poles. As I looked I saw the beasts level them as they lazily grazed and worked toward us.

Their favorite method of procedure appeared to be to lean against the pole and scratch their backs with the sharp spikes I had laboriously nailed into the poles for many weary miles for days and weeks on end. The mud was thickly caked upon the backs of these buffalo and that, entirely aside from any vermin they might well be infested with, made these sharp spikes simply a delight.

I could see the dust fly from their hides. When one big bull was having a great time another huge beast would take note of him and immediately proceed to scratch his back. It was nothing unusual to see three shaggy beasts scratching their backs, with other buffalo waiting for their turn. And inevitably the poles would go down.

Soon the sharp-eyed Liligh took note of what was going on and the cursing that he vented upon those poor animals was something that made the very air lurid. He dispatched the cowboys, sending my field glass with them, to ride out five or ten miles and ascertain the extent of the damage. Then Liligh, dragging me along with him for no reason that I could figure except to sustain moral courage, took me to Creighton's wag-

on. We found the boss extremely busy with his telegraph operators.

"Boss, I'm sorry to disturb you," began Liligh, "but the buffalo air raisin' hell with our telegraph poles."

"Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm busy?" roared Creighton.

"What air we gonna do?"

"Do! Man alive! What about?"

"Wal, I was talkin' about these pesky buffalo."

"*Drive them away!*"

"Hell, we can't. Thar's only about ten thousand of 'em. We'll jest hev to let 'em mosey along and do their mischief, like they bin doin'."

"What mischief?" asked Creighton.

"Why—they're pushin' over our telegraph poles."

At this juncture Shaw rode up.

"Come here, Shaw," Creighton demanded, "maybe you can talk straight. What about buffalo and poles?"

"Wal, boss, I just rode in from scoutin' back along the line," returned the cowboy. "There's about twenty-five miles of telegraph poles down."

"Twenty-five miles!" echoed our leader incredulously. "Why wasn't I told? Talk, cowboy!"

"All right, Boss, I will, if you'll let me get a word in edgeways. There was a good big bunch of buffs followin' us an' they passed us today. They laid the poles low an' they did it by scratchin' their back on the spikes you ordered Cameron to nail in all our poles."

"Merciful heaven!" ejaculated Creighton. "That's a catastrophe. Buffalo scratching their backs? Who ever heard of the like? Spikes! Scratching their backs! Twenty-five miles of poles! Why wasn't I told?"

"You was told, Boss. I just told you," returned the cowboy.

Creighton stared. His face turned purple. He fell into a magnificent fury and first his raging was incoherent. Then his speech became clear enough for everybody to distinguish his meaning. "Twenty-five miles of poles down! Six days' work for the whole outfit! All because—buffalo wanted to scratch their backs! All because I—*I* ordered the poles driven full of spikes! As if I had not suffered enough on this hellish job! This is the limit! This is the end! Twenty-five miles! Spikes! And I was told—advised!" Then he turned fiercely to his shocked foreman and shouted hoarsely, "Liligh, kick me good and hard!"

"Boss! Yer—yer out of yer haid. I can't kick you."

"Somebody'll have to—somebody ought to do worse! Shaw, get off that horse and kick me."

"Wal, I'll shore be glad to do thet," drawled Shaw. He slipped out of the saddle and kicked our leader so hard that the blow sounded like a bass drum. Creighton plunged forward fully six feet and went sprawling to plow face and hands in the dirt.

I was in convulsions to which I was afraid to succumb. Darnell and Lowden were holding their sides as if about to explode. The rest of the men were stricken in mingled fright and mirth. Then Shaw lay down on the ground and rolled over and over and howled in a queer strangled voice.

Creighton scrambled to his feet. He was dirt from head to toe. He wiped the dust off his sweating face with a fierce gesture. "You infernal devil of a cowboy!" he thundered. "I didn't order you to half kill me! You're fired!"

Shaw sat up and after taking a moment to subdue himself, he said in a husky whisper, "Wal, Boss, you told me to do it, an' it shore was comin' to you."

"You—you took advantage of my confusion and anger," fumed our leader haltingly.

Shaw slowly got to his feet. "All right, Boss, I'm fired," he drawled, "an' thet means for the first time thet you've showed yella."

"*I!* Yellow?" choked Creighton.

"You shore are, Boss. An' it's too bad, 'cause how in hell are you goin' to finish this job without me?"

"All of you idiots get out of my sight," yelled our leader as if he could not bear to look at us longer. "All but you, Shaw! You come with me. We've got to talk!"

"Aw!" breathed the cowboy with his slow, infectious grin, "that's more like yourself. I shore don't mind if I do."

Wherewith Creighton put his arm around the cowboy's shoulder and led him away.

Chapter Eleven

Gunflame and Flood Water

THE long-looked-for Chimney Rock finally rose up above us.

From a camp some five miles distant I saw the Rock at sunset standing grand and high, shining crimson aloft and gold at its base. After so many weeks, seemingly years, of flat barren prairie, there was something soul-freeing in the sight of this landmark.

The next morning before sunrise, in the transparent atmosphere of dawn, I saw it look like a great white sentinel beckoning the travelers to its shelter and to the pure water that it marked. That day we ran the five miles of telegraph poles in a state of mind that was in the nature of a celebration, with one day, at least, given over to a forgetfulness of bitter toil.

The conformation of Chimney Rock was still impressive even under its shadow. There was a volcanic-like cone of bare gray stone slanting to a sharp apex from which towered the high shaft of rock that gave the landmark its name. Not improbably the singular impressiveness to the fur traders and trappers and emigrants, the glory of Chimney Rock, was actually more in what it represented than in its splendor as a physical phenomenon. From afar when the westbound travelers first sighted it, it meant an end of the ghastly barrens and the beginning of the long rolling steppes of rough country that led up to the Rockies.

We made camp in its shadow about mid-afternoon of a day that had been marked by clouded skies and pleasant weather. We were again a small camp and relatively few men at the hour. Creighton had gone off hunting with some of his men. This was actually the first time that I could remember his taking time off for recreation. Shaw and Lowden had ridden off on their own, no doubt to climb to the height and look the country over. Darnell was engaged in tasks around our wagon. Liligh was in camp in charge, together with Edney, Houser, Bob Wainwright, Hal Whiting, and Cliff Nelson. Another crew of men had started off with one wagon to unwind a coil of telegraph wire along

the course of the trail.

I found myself inexplicably nervous and watchful and I attributed that to the absence of Shaw and Lowden and to the rather small company of men left in camp. It was because of that, no doubt, that I discovered a party of horsemen riding toward our camp up the trail. There were eight horsemen in this group, driving several pack animals in front of them.

I did not like their looks but I hesitated to inform Liligh; and, by the time they had approached quite close to us, he discovered them and he stood stockstill to favor them with a long scrutiny. Then he quietly told me to call Edney, Wainwright, and the other men in camp.

I had seen a good many hard characters since my sojourn on the frontier, but this was the worst looking lot yet. They halted some dozen rods or so distant and some of them dismounted to hold back the pack animals. Then two of the riders approached us. One of them was a heavily built, darkly bearded man who wore a slouch sombrero pulled down over his face so that his eyes appeared to be only dark gleams in his visage. What struck me most about him was that he carried a rifle across his pommel and he wore two guns, one conspicuous on each side. His companion was a younger man, a lean and rangy Westerner, sallow-faced and tawny-haired.

The big man turned in his saddle and called back to the others in a loud, coarse voice, "Fellers, hyar's some of my timber left. They haven't used it all."

That speech amazed me and made Liligh curse under his breath. Wainwright and the other men came forward, curious and apparently not at all anxious because they were unarmed.

"Hey thar, Western Union men," boomed the heavily bearded leader, "whar's yore boss?"

"If you mean Creighton, he's away from camp jest at present," returned Liligh coldly. "He'll be back pronto. While he's absent I'm in charge."

"Wal, we haven't any time to parley. I've trailed this outfit from Julesburg."

"Yas? Yu haven't trailed us very fast," returned Liligh caustically. "What'cha want?"

"I see you have five wagonloads of poles left an' you must have used twenty other loads. This timber was cut off my homestead property back of Julesburg an' I am gonna be paid for it."

"Thet's ridic'lous," said Liligh heatedly. "This timber was cut miles this side of Julesburg, but even if it hedn't been, nobody could charge us fer it."

"Wal, you heared what I said," returned the other darkly. "I don't care what you think. I'm callin' on you to pay me fer my timber. An' I ain't gonna waste any more time about it."

"Ha! Ha! A new kind of holdup! Timber rustlers on the plains where thar ain't no property rights! Wal, thet's the limit."

The black-bearded man studied Liligh a moment with sharp eyes that then shifted to us other men and then out around camp and beyond. "Fork over five thousand dollars an' be quick about it," he ordered harshly.

I thought Liligh would strangle trying to get rid of his tobacco quid and stutter and curse at the same time. He recognized the situation and it was a tough spot. The leader's com-

panion had a rifle over the pommel and a swift glance ascertained that all the other men had also.

It did not seem a question of Liligh's courage. He would fight at the drop of a hat, but it was certainly obvious that we were not only unarmed but outnumbered and that a fight was out of the question. Liligh had charge in the absence of Creighton and undoubtedly he knew where our leader kept his cash. Money was the last thing considered in this construction of the Western Union. Nevertheless, it was a bitter pill for Liligh to swallow.

"Yu ain't foolin' me none," he rasped. "I know damn shore yer a bandit. Suppose I'm not willin' to pay yu the five thousand dollars?"

"Wal, thet wouldn't be very smart," returned the big man with a grim laugh. "If you show fight we'll clean you out before you can do us much damage. Better pay up an' pronto. I reckon yore boss wouldn't wanta see those five loads of telegraph poles go up in smoke."

That decided Liligh. There didn't seem to be anything that he could do about it. But on the moment when Liligh surrendered, white in the face and frothing at the mouth, there came a swift thud of horses' hoofs behind our wagon and suddenly there were Shaw and Lowden dashing right up on us, and halting their swift horses to a sliding stop that scattered gravel all over.

I saw the lean rider give a violent start and call in a low, sharp voice to the big man, "Bill, heah's yore old friend, Ranger Shaw. We cautioned you about this deal. Now, look out!"

Shaw's lightning gaze appeared to take in all in a single glance. "Liligh, what the hell is goin' on here?" he cut out, his voice thin and ice-edged.

"It's a holdup, Shaw. This feller claims we cut our telegraph poles from his homestead timber. He wants five thousand dollars. Says to produce the money pronto or fight. It's the damnedest, most bare-faced outrage I ever heard of."

Shaw's gaze was turned toward the mounted men. They sat their horses motionless, tightly holding their rifles across the pommels.

"Howdy, Bill Peffer," called the cowboy in a voice that put my teeth on edge. "They say you cain't teach an old dawg new tricks an' here you are rustlin' as always, only you must have forgot yore brand-burnin' tools."

"Shaw, that's my timber—an' I'm gonna be paid fer it."

"Shore as hell you air, but not with easy money, you damn cow thief."

Then followed a tense moment which seemed to me to be the deadly and potent lull before the storm. Lowden, who sat his horse a little behind Shaw, slipped out of his saddle.

"Vance, do yu know this feller?" queried Liligh. "Yer talk is shore kinda familiar."

"Know him! I shore do," returned the cowboy in bitter hardness. "Low-down hombre! I put him in jail in Brownsville for stealin' cattle. He broke jail an' killed our sheriff, an' here I run into him way up on the Wyomin' line.

"Peffer, thet's what I couldn't stand about the ranger service. Arrestin' low-down hombres instead of killin' them! I should have bored you when I had the chanct."

"Shaw—don't start anythin' hyar. We'll be on our way," returned Peffer

harshly, his livid face dropping beads of sweat. He was shaking from head to foot and he crouched over his saddle. His action was that of an irresistible intention to jerk the gripped rifle over his pommel. It pointed in the wrong direction for him.

In a flash Shaw was out of his saddle and when he darted from behind his horse his gun was belching red flame and smoke. The big man lurched in his saddle, throwing his rifle with upflung arms to pitch heavily to the ground, where he began to flop.

The second rider had jerked into some kind of action which had been frozen by Shaw's fire and he slumped out of his saddle like an empty sack. His rifle fell on him. He never moved again. The horses plunged away.

Lowden appeared at Shaw's side and he ran forward, his two guns barking at the other horsemen. They wheeled their horses and the three in the rear, who had retained the halters of the pack animals, dragged them at a gallop.

It was all over so quickly that I could hardly realize it. Shaw, with his smoking gun in his hand, walked over to the two prostrate men, bestowing hardly a glance on the lean fellow; but in the case of the giant he pushed back the black sombrero from the dark face and took a long look. Then, turning away, he flipped his gun, put it back in its sheath, and walked over toward his horse that had made no move at the gunshots.

"Boss," he said, addressing Liligh, "I reckon you ought've treated timber rustlers same as cattle thieves."

When we reached the higher country of Wyoming, I somehow anticipated a vastly different and more happy continuation of our labors. But the change to more picturesque country, the trees and birds and the wild animals and the colorful growths in the bottom lands along the streams did not change our work in the least. It was just as hard, on some days, as it ever had been. We had firewood in plenty and fresh meat to eat, but to offset this we had to stand guard for fear of other Indian attacks.

The Pony Express riders coming from the west told us the threatened war between cattlemen and cowboys in the Sweetwater Valley had become a reality, and everything we heard about South Pass tended toward the conviction that the line would be harder to run through that place than anywhere in its whole length.

The Indians became bolder and we had several brushes with them. Our days and nights were marked by incidents that had never been on the program of our construction work.

On our arrival at the Laramie River, word passed from mouth to mouth that we would be held up, for the Laramie was in flood. And while we made camp in the early cold twilight, some of our men reported that a stagecoach and a number of freighters were halted on the other bank and that Sunderlund's wagon train was stuck on this very side of the Laramie, little more than a stone's throw from where we had halted. That night I spent a long time pacing up and down in the starlight, listening to the roar of the flooded river and gradually succumbing to sweet hopes and fears that would not be denied now that I was in the vicinity of Kit Sunderlund again.

Next morning we were called before sunrise. Creighton had ordered

that we cross the Laramie River. Liligh, who knew all about these northern rivers, threw up his hands and raged impotently. The men seemed grimly resigned to whatever might happen.

After breakfast, while Tom and Jack were bringing in the oxen and the horses Shaw went with me to take a look at the river. We had pulled up close to Sunderlund's camp and the bustle and activity over there intimated that Creighton's arrival with his soldiers and men had prompted Sunderlund to attempt the crossing also.

Presently I stood on the banks of the Laramie River in flood. The stream was bank-full now, muddy and swift, eddying and gurgling, full of driftwood and débris. It was narrower than I had imagined. Our shore took off at a jump into deep water and it looked as if, on the other side, some distance below, the stream widened and flowed over what must have been shallow bars, for there were snags and stranded logs and tufts of willows sticking out of the water. We could see columns of blue smoke and wagons on the other side, and oxen and mules grazing on the grass.

"She's on the rise," said Shaw, after a survey of the flooded stream, "an' I reckon we'll do well to cross pronto."

"Vance, I should think this crossing would be terribly dangerous," I said ponderingly.

"Dangerous? Hell, yes. Shore it's dangerous. Ain't you got used to thet yet?"

While we were studying the situation and talking, Liligh came out and joined us, with Wainwright and Edney.

"What yu think, Vance?" asked the foreman.

"Wal, Boss, we're just goin' across, thet's all," drawled Shaw. "But mebbe thet Sunderlund outfit will have some hell. I reckon he wants some help from us."

"Yes, he asked fer it an' Creighton bragged how we'd take his outfit across bag an' baggage with his longhorns to boot. Jest as if we wouldn't hev trouble enough on our own!"

"Aw, we'll make it, all right. I'm suggestin' thet we pull up river as far as the take-off is good so we can slant down an' hit this shallow place below here. But whatever we do, we want to do it pronto an' advise Sunderlund to do the same."

In less than an hour the wagon trains were rolling up river to a point some hundreds of yards above where Sunderlund had camped and they congregated there awaiting orders. Above where the wagons were congregated Sunderlund's cattle had been driven to the bank in a wedge shape with the sharp end forward.

Counting the riders on each side and those in the rear of the herd, there must have been a dozen of them mounted on horses, in addition to Shaw and Lowden, who were at the extreme front end of the wedge. It was evident that our cowboys were going to lead the herd across.

When the shooting and yelling began in the rear the mass of cattle moved forward and shoved the others into the river. They piled and slid off with great splashes and some of them went clear out of sight, soon to emerge with noses out of the water. Lowden swam his horse above the point of the herd and Shaw moved at about the same distance below.

Before the rear end of the herd had reached the river bank the first animals were halfway across and down river to a point below where I stood. The current swept them downward quite swiftly. The cowboys continued to shoot and yell and soon the whole herd was in the river.

I saw a long line of wide horns sticking out of the water and I was amazed to notice how surprisingly easy it looked. Two hundred yards below my position Shaw and Lowden got out of deep water onto the bar and waded out with the animals close behind. In what seemed an astoundingly short time the cattle were wading out into the thicket on the opposite shore, and when they were all out the cowboys rode up the opposite bank to a point as far as I could see, where they made ready to return.

It developed that there was much more order and precision about the cattle crossing than there would be in the case of the wagons. The first wagons drove off with a rush, the huge prairie schooners careening and the double team of oxen dipping clear out of sight. The wagon beds sank a couple of feet, presently to rise buoyantly and with the oxen up and swimming and a man on each side mounted on a mule urging them on. They seemed to be having no difficulty.

"Say, pard," said Darnell, "I ain't so damn shore of two of my oxen. They gave me trouble before in the water an' I reckon you better fork my hoss an' ride upstream beside us so if my oxen stall or drown I can pile out of this here seat and grab my hoss's tail so you can drag me out."

I stepped back and untied the halter of Tom's horse and, coiling it as I drew the horse up, I mounted from the wagon into the saddle, very much aware of the congestion in my breast and the beating of my heart.

I followed Tom's wagon as he slowly drove up to the jumping-off place. As I took my place to the right of Tom there were three wagons ahead of us all in process of taking off, perhaps a dozen yards apart.

Ahead of them and floating down in a long slant were other prairie schooners, some close together and others wide apart, all striving to reach the long shallow point. As far as I could see, they were not having any trouble.

Edney and Wainwright and Herb Lane had lined up beside Darnell. Herb Lane yelled to our men, "Follow me in single file, not too close. It won't do to get bunched. The river is rising and full of driftwood. Come on!"

One by one the big wagons slid down the incline and took to the water. Darnell was last, not far from Wainwright, and I did not have to urge my horse. He just plunged in, all but his nose going under and immersing me to above my waist. It was a shock to me, but the moment I felt him come up and breast the current, my trepidation changed to exhilaration.

"All you have to do is to look out for driftwood," yelled Tom. "If any runs into you, lean over and shove it aside."

In another moment we had passed the line of foliage on the near side and were out in the river. As far as we were concerned there did not seem to be anything to it. Darnell had been worried about his leading team of oxen but they seemed to me to do very well. I kept even with Tom about 30

feet upstream and now I felt quite safe on the horse.

Looking upstream, I noted that the current had apparently swelled and that there was more driftwood than before we started. Glancing backward, I saw that the wagons were hurriedly lining up, with drivers and soldiers on mules and men on foot shouting and gesticulating. There seemed to be more alarm than had been manifest before.

Creighton's loads of telegraph poles were lined up on the bank ready to start when they had a chance and behind them was a congested mass of oxen and wagons consisting of the soldiers' wagon train, three or four of Creighton's, and the remainder and greater number belonging to Sunderlund's caravan.

I began to worry that we might miss the shallow point, which was now getting close. But when I saw Herb Lane ground and his oxen emerge to begin to wade I felt reassured. Wainwright followed close on his heels, and when Edney's wagon was halfway to shore across that shallow point, the foremost team on Tom's wagon struck bottom, strained and plunged, caught hold with their powerful hoofs, and pulled the second team and the wagon out of deep water. My horse next found bottom and he announced the fact with a satisfied snort.

We waded out. Once on dry land, Darnell halted his oxen to give them a breathing spell and to look back up the river.

"Some sight, hey, Wayne?" he shouted. "If that mess of wagons come through all right, it'll be a miracle."

"Tom, it sure is a sight," I agreed as I surveyed the scene.

"Wal, pard, I gotta be gettin' out of here," called Tom, taking up his reins. "That first wagon will be on top of me if I don't. I reckon you better stay here jest a little below where we waded out. Mebbe you could help somebody."

When Tom drove up the well-defined muddy road into the timber and the next wagon came wading out, I crossed the track to a point below and rode out on the sand bar until I was just at the edge of the swift current.

It was a good vantage point from which to watch the procession heading down the stream. Here I was able to note that the river had already risen a foot or two since we had started. I could see one large tree rolling over in midcurrent way up the river beyond the taking-off place.

One by one the wagons came down straight as a beeline, with their oxen striking the shallow water and heaving the wagons out on the hard bottom to wag up the gentle slope into the timber. Then they began to come in twos and threes, calculating their position so that they would hit above the shallow point.

In a very few moments, it seemed, the last of them had left the bank and there was a flotilla of white canvas tops gliding smoothly down the river, somewhat between 30 and 40, I calculated. Above my position on the bank I noticed a group of spectators, some of them mounted Indians, all deeply interested in the crossing.

Facing the river again, I saw the rolling green tree right in the midst of the wagons. It caught several of them, fortunately to slide off. Once a

couple of soldiers swimming their mules laid hold of this piece of driftwood and pulled it or retarded it until the current slid it away from the wagon it had imperiled.

The smaller prairie schooner on the outside, however, could not avoid the tree, which lodged squarely against the wheels. Already the wagon was out of line with the shallow point where I stood. In a few moments, if it did not get free of the tree, it would be carried beyond the point into the deep, rough water around the bend.

I urged Wingfoot out into the river and waded him until he got beyond his depth. I was close enough now to make out the driver, who was a Negro and who was straining at his reins as if for dear life and bawling at his oxen. Beside the Negro sat Kit Sunderlund with white face and wide dark eyes.

A hot gush of blood rushed all over me. My thoughts whirled over and over until for a moment I was absolutely helpless. Then she saw me and recognized me. She waved both hands frantically and called out in a sweet, high treble something that I could not distinguish.

I spurred Wingfoot upstream and in a moment more he was even with the wagon and some 50 feet or more distant. I turned him then and we went downstream with the current, gradually approaching the wagon. The front team of oxen almost submerged and only the noses of the second brace were above water. The front of the wagon was sinking and the rear end lifting. In that position wagon and oxen drifted below the shallow point and headed around the curve.

I drew closer. "Now, Sambo," I yelled, with all my might, "get off the wagon, take the girl—and swim till I can pick you up. I don't dare come any closer. One of these snags might catch the horse."

The Negro relinquished the reins and when he stood up to help the girl he was up to his knees in water. As he was about to help her the wagon gave a tremendous lurch, and the log bumped against it with a great splash, throwing him and the girl into the water.

They both went under. When they came up they were some feet apart and it was evident that the Negro was not an expert swimmer. Kit, however, could swim well enough to keep from drifting into the wagon or the oxen but there was great danger of her being struck by one of the branches that were thrashing about her.

As I was reaching for her one of the branches swung low, narrowly missing me and knocking the girl under water. But I got hold of her and reining the valiant animal away from the danger of colliding with the oxen and wagon, I dragged her out of harm's way. Wingfoot was making fast time when his progress was impeded. I turned to discover that the Negro had caught the horse's tail and was hanging on to it. Soon I got the girl's head and shoulders up on my knee and we were headed shoreward.

We made for the shore, even while we were being carried around the bend. I heard a loud splash and looking back saw that the tree that was obstructing the wagon had caught the current on its trunk end and was torn free from the wagon which righted itself with the second brace of

oxen still swimming. They were drifting and floating out of the current.

Wingfoot found bottom and with a tremendous heave and snort he began wading and in short order brought us to safety. I slipped out of the saddle in water up to my waist and caught the girl in my arms. There was blood on her temple but she was conscious. I picked her up and waded ashore, where I set her on her feet. Wingfoot was following me and the Negro was rising to his feet, evidently none the worse for the accident.

"Sambo, we've had luck," I said. "You can save that wagon. Run up the bank and fetch men to help you." With that I started to walk up the sloping bank, supporting the girl. "Are you all right—are you hurt?"

"I—I think I'm alive," she whispered faintly, clinging to my arm. "I was stunned by something. Then I swallowed—a lot—of that muddy water. I—I'm afraid I'll—have to rest a little," she murmured, and she stumbled to her knees.

As I bent over her, supporting her, she let go of me and lay back on the grass. I knelt beside her.

"Wayne Cameron, you—you—have saved my life again!" she whispered softly.

"So it seems," I replied as lightly as I could. "Funny what a habit I have of hanging around when you get in trouble."

"Don't make light of it," she implored.

"Oh, you're excited. You're upset, naturally. But don't let it worry you, darling."

"Darling?" Those great unfathomable eyes on me.

"Why, yes—of course. What else?" I replied, somewhat haltingly. "I'm

one of these unfortunate people who, well, who never recover from—"

"From what?" she asked, her voice stronger.

"Never mind what, Kit. I must get away from here."

"Wayne? From what?"

"Well, if you insist, from the absolutely irresistible charm of a girl who thought bad things about me."

"Oh, forgive me—please," she implored. "Vance Shaw called on me last night. What he said to me—I can never forget. It made me so small. Forgive me, Wayne. Let me explain."

"Well, Kit Sunderlund, I will consider it," I replied gravely, gazing down upon her. "But don't talk any more now. Now, let me help you up and on the horse."

I lifted her sideways into the saddle and ascertaining that she would be able to sit there and hold on I took up the bridle and led a zigzag way up through the willows and the cottonwoods, my heart painfully full.

I soon found my way to her wagon train and eventually found Sunderlund, who had safely crossed and who had been running around frantically in search of his daughter. I cut short his extravagant gratitude and directed him to where no doubt Sambo was already trying to extricate their wagon. Then I led Wingfoot off, glad to get away by myself.

When I reached the bank, the latter third of the wagon train was still coming and evidently would make the crossing safely. I ran into Tom and Shaw. Tom whooped and made a grab for me and Shaw softly swore at me

under his breath. Then Creighton burst upon me, wet, bedraggled, grimy, but beaming.

"Cameron, I've been hunting for you. Our telegraph poles are all across, thanks be, and that was my main worry. Nobody lost, but several men cut up bad, and you better get busy with your medicine kit."

It took me until sunset to care for all those that had been hurt. Only one man had been injured badly and it turned out that his injury was not too serious. Nearly all Creighton's wagon train made the crossing without loss and Sunderlund's big caravan had not suffered in much greater degree.

Miss Sunderlund's wagon had been hauled out safely without any material damage to this little home of hers on wheels. Her Negro maid had been found in a faint upon the floor of the wagon. The forward team of oxen had drowned and it really was remarkable that under the circumstances the wagon had been saved.

When I finished my work I returned to see the telegraph line already stretched across the river and hooked on to a pole, and I asked Darnell how they managed to get it across. He told me Shaw had recrossed the river on his horse, taking Darnell's horse with him. On reaching the other side, he fastened one end of the wire to the saddle horn of his horse, spoke softly, mounted Darnell's horse, and then plunged into the stream, his trained animal following. Creighton was so well pleased that the entire crossing was so successful that he raised one of his smaller American flags to the top of the first telegraph pole west of the Laramie, and called out in his stentorian voice, "On to Ft. Bridger!"

Chapter Twelve

The Luck of Some People!

I had started to walk away from our camp that night to look for Creighton when Vance Shaw caught up with me. He smiled and in his eyes was a look I had not seen for many a day.

"I saw you pull Kit Sunderlund out of the river today. Santa Maria, the luck of some people," he beamed.

"Luck? How do you call it luck unless you mean bad?"

"Wal, Wayne, comin' so quick after the little talk I had with the lady, it's just about too damn good to be true," drawled the cowboy. "This has been comin' to Kit for a long time, pard. I found out just how terribly she is in love with you."

"Vance, don't give me that talk. What I want to know once and for all—are you in love with her?"

"Me! In love with her? Hell no," Vance said, and looked away into the distance.

"Vance," I said, "tell me just what you said to Kit."

"Lord, I disremember, but I gave her hell," Vance said, looking back at me.

"All right, then, don't tell me. But don't you think at least that you owe some sort of an explanation to your tenderfoot friend?"

"Wal, Wayne, it's like this. I made up my mind to butt right into yore affairs. You see, knowin' you and knowin' her, I just did the best I could figger to keep you two apart until I was damn sure that Kit felt about you the way you felt about her."

"That's all right, Vance," I said, trying to sound facetious, "but how about my finding her in your arms that night?"

"Wal, Yank, just a second before you came, I got through telling Kit that while you're no longer a tenderfoot as far as the West was concerned, you were still a damn tenderfoot in your heart. And loving you, she seemed to kinda like what I said, and that was her way of just sort of thankin' me for sayin' it."

Sunderlund's wagons were some distance from our camp up the river and located on the bank within the sound of the rushing water. There was a bright campfire around which the Negroes were cleaning up and Sunderlund sat with the cattlemen partners, smoking and talking.

I walked the few paces to the end of Kit's wagon and there she sat in white, with both the moonlight and the firelight shining in upon her.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "If you're able to—to make yourself look lovely like that, you must be all right after your fright."

"All right?" she questioned archly. "That is relative. If you mean well—and quite happy—I am."

In another moment she emerged from the wagon, clothed in a long dark coat with a hood around her head. She took my arm and we walked away along the river bank.

I felt pretty much embarrassed because she appeared like a stranger to me, and a tall lovely stranger at that, her clear profile exposed to the moonlight and strands of chestnut hair moving slightly in the breeze. Without a word we passed some distance up the bank and halted in a picturesque spot under a big cottonwood where a huge fallen log obstructed our path.

As I leaned against the log she stood in the moonlight facing me, still retaining her hold on my arm.

"I have to tell you something—to explain, and again beg your forgiveness," she began.

"All right, if you insist. I don't mind telling you that once I would have reveled in such a situation. But now there is nothing to forgive. I'm just happy to be with you."

"I've been used to cowboys all my life. They are a lovable bad lot. They are grand fighters, but they haven't any morals. I became used to having them come to me after a rendezvous with some other girl and make love to me, and ask me to marry them. Vance Shaw did that often, but, in spite of the looseness of his character, I almost loved him."

"Kit, I'm sure you have misjudged Shaw. But go on and finish what you want to say."

"At first sight, almost, I saw that you were the man for me. I was jealous. When just by chance I happened to look in your wagon and saw that big-eyed girl almost undressed—surely the prettiest thing that I ever saw—I was consumed with a burning, terrible passion. Vance made me see last night not only my horrible mistake but what a shallow, jealous cat I am. All the time it was Shaw who was in love with her. What a fool I was."

"Well, Kit, if it has relieved you, I'm glad. Of course he meant to marry Ruby. I can judge of Vance's heart only by this: since Ruby has been gone he is a changed man."

"Wayne, I hope you will champion me as you do him," she responded

softly. "And now—am I to be forgiven?"

"Kit, you were forgiven before this," I replied, and I kissed her hand.

"What was it you called me back there on the river bank? It has been used to me before many a time, but hardly with my consent and never with any of the feeling which it aroused in me when you used it."

"May I inquire just what that feeling was?" I asked a little huskily, still trying to preserve my equanimity.

"Love."

And then, as if of one mind, we were in each other's arms. I lost my sense of time and place, of the bright moon shining down upon the swirling river, the murmur of the flowing water, the wailing of the coyotes, and the wind in the cottonwoods. When we did emerge from that blissful, unthinking state, I imagined from the rapt look upon Kit's beautiful face that it was the same to her as it was to me.

"Darling, I think we should be going back to the wagons, where I think it will be fitting for me to tell your father and ask his consent."

"Wayne, that will be granted," she said with a low happy laugh. "He said that you were one Yankee he admired. But, after all, hadn't you better ask me first?"

"Kit, I thought *you* would take it for granted, from all I was saying—that I was *begging* you to marry me."

"No, dear, I didn't exactly. A girl—has to be asked. I accept you, Wayne, and—and I'm unutterably happy. Oh, if you but knew the many miserable hours I lay awake at night torturing myself about you!"

"You could not possibly have suffered more than I. Then we are really engaged?"

"Indeed, sir, you are, and I will hold you to it. Have you a ring?"

"No, ma'am. I'm sorry to say I haven't and I wonder where in this uncivilized country I can get one?"

"Here, I have one," she said softly. "It was my mother's. You wear it until you get me one." And slipping the ring on my little finger where it fitted fairly well, she continued, "Now, let us go back to camp. I will tell Dad. We have much to talk over. Soon we shall be in the Sweetwater Valley. Dear, when you are finished with the Western Union, come to me there."

Ft. Laramie occupied a commanding and picturesque site on the north bank of the Laramie River. It was a large structure, crudely but solidly built of heavy timbers, and had a high tower in front and bastions at two ends. Back of the fort toward the slope of the hill was an encampment of Sioux, their high conical tents shining almost white in the sunlight. We made our camp well away from the fort; and Sunderlund, with his large caravan, camped still farther down the river.

Barnes, the Pony Express rider, who had made friends with the cowboys and me, had arrived that day and took dinner with us.

"I got a lot to tell you, boys," he said. "South Pass is shore hummin' these days. You'll get the treat of yore life when you get that far. Most all the men I talked to think the Western Union is a grand idea an' will help settle the West. I heared it whispered, too, that there are some agin the telegraph, for reasons I can't

imagine. Lord knows, yo're gonna have trouble enough gettin' up the Sweetwater an' over the Pass without havin' any opposition from white men. But I've a hunch you will have.

"Let me tell you again, you cowboys, an' you too, Cameron, if what I hear about you is true," concluded Barnes, "the cattle business in western Wyomin' is goin' to be one grand bonanza. Shore there won't be gold to pick out of the streets like there is in South Pass, but there'll be a fortune for every one of you."

As we traveled higher and higher into this Wyoming hinterland the nights grew colder. There was frost in the early morning and that was what painted the leaves in gold and scarlet and brown, every day lending a more varied hue to the landscape.

One morning at sunrise I climbed, accompanied by Tom, to the summit of Independence Rock. It was a gray granite pile looking as if it were a mosaic of separate rocks irregularly joined together and towering at least 100 feet above the ground. From here I had a wonderful view of the Sweetwater, a clear, amber stream winding away up the valley.

"Oh, Tom!" I ejaculated, breathing deeply. "It's grand."

"Wal, pard, it *is* pretty nifty, but you're lookin' in the wrong direction. Take a peep off here."

Following his pointing finger my gaze was directed to the northwest and upward to what I thought was the sky. The early morning atmosphere was extremely rare and transparent, and when I saw a magnificent ragged line of white run along the horizon to end in a wide break and then rise again, pure and sharp against the blue sky, I imagined that I was looking at a magnified line of clouds. I had never seen any clouds like these. Below that white ragged line, there was a zigzag belt of black and both the black and white lines ended at the dip in this strange formation to take it up again to the southward.

"Pard," said my companion, and his voice seemed to come from far off, "you're takin' your first look at the Rockies. That's the Wind River Range of mountains, the finest range in the West. That break is the Pass you've heard so much about. The early trappers an' explorers went over there. South Pass, the minin' town, is down under this right-hand end. An' there you can see where the white peaks stick up again away to the southward."

So magnificent was the spectacle, so grand this upflinging of the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, that I could not speak. I dragged my gaze from the heights and looked down beneath the Rock to see the white wagon trains, the grazing mules and oxen, the blue columns of smoke trailing upward, the amber river shining between its banks of gold and scarlet. The Sweetwater Valley wound away between its purple hills into the colorful distance, to merge into a dark blue haze, out of which the two grand sawtooth sections of mountain ranges, divided by the pass between them, towered into the infinity of sky above.

Of all our camps, that was the hardest one to leave. Everybody I spoke to shared my opinion. Even Creighton said he hoped the rest of the camps would be like this one. But though travel up the Sweetwater

seemed to be approaching paradise, the digging of post holes, the raising of poles and wires, the tamping down of rocks and earth into the holes, went relentlessly on and on and on. There had always been drive behind us, but now there was more. There was accomplishment—almost 800 miles of telegraph line raised and taking messages.

Chapter Thirteen

Tidings and Bullets

I FOR one did not compute the remaining distance on the Trail to Green River or Ft. Bridger, where we expected to meet the Mormon telegraph builders working east. But I could not help but hear Liligh's men discussing it. Darnell became more silent and watchful as we neared the scene of his ruin and where certainly he could expect trouble.

The Oregon Trail crept in a winding, gradual ascent up this long slope to the continental divide. Therefore the erecting of telegraph poles and the raising of the wires took longer per mile. But to offset this our leader got us up in the white, frosty dawn and made camp when darkness prohibited further work.

Our great hope and purpose was to cross South Pass and get down off the backbone of the divide before winter caught us, and at the rate we were going we would succeed. We were less alone now in our work than at any time since we had started. Travel from Laramie and points east grew to be heavy. Only one wagon train passed us and that was a small one. Every day, however, there were freighters, stagecoaches, mounted men with pack animals, and, of course, the Pony Express riders.

We slowly crawled up the slope like a gigantic snake, stretching the telegraph line. For some time we had seen the black and yellow smoke of the huge stamp mill marking the gold digging at South Pass. We were within a week's hard work of this objective when one morning Vance Shaw rode back to the caravan from his daily scouting trip ahead. He dismounted beside our wagon.

"Bad news, pards, an' it's got me stumped," he said. "Jack, go after Liligh an' Herb Lane an' don't mention what I say. If the big boss should see you an' ask questions don't make anythin' strange of my ridin' in off the trail."

In short order Jack returned with our construction boss and the wagon-train leader, Herb Lane.

"Wal, men, gather around natural-like an', listen," began Shaw, and deliberately lighted his cigarette. "Funny how this mawnin' I was figurin' things had been workin' out too good for us. They shore have. But we've struck a snag. Mebbe it don't amount to a damn. Mebbe you fellers will make light of it."

"All right, Shaw. Don't beat around the bush. Get it off yer chest," snapped Liligh.

"You seen me come in from ahaid on the trail. Wal, I was trackin' hawss tracks thet excited my suspicion behind us a ways. Early this mawnin' I rode back along the line. I found a telegraph pole down, not chopped but sawed clean through, with a piece chipped out of the wire an' the insulator missin'. Of course,

it was white man's work.

"I saw boot tracks in the dust, made last night, in different sizes an' not hawssman's boots either. They was a big flat hobnail track new to me. Looked like two saddle hawsses an' one pack animal. Wal, I tracked them at a trot five miles further back on the line an' found another pole cut just the same way. An' five miles further, more or less, I found a third. The tracks came into the trail from up the slope an' I tracked them to a patch of timber a mile or so off, an' from there down into a little draw where two men with a pack animal had made camp last night, an' dug out early this mawnin'.

"From there I cut across an' took up the trail again past yore wagon trains an' went on ahaid until I lost the track I'd been followin'. Now the whole damn thing has got me kinda stumped an' I reckon I'd like to know what you think about it."

"Hell," spat out Liligh. "Thet dovetails with somethin' I've suspected an' never told the boss. It kin mean only one thing. Some white man for some reason or other wants to block our telegraph messages back East."

"Tom, yo're familiar with this country. What's yore angle?" went on Shaw.

"Men, it sounds mighty like the underground doin's in South Pass."

"Wal, thet's tellin' us somethin', but it doesn't explain."

"It doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference now," went on Liligh. "Creighton hasn't any telegraph operator just now an' he says thet while he could make a stab at sendin' messages, they wouldn't be accurate. But any day now he's expectin' an operator to ketch up with us by stage, an' then, if the telegraph line is cut an' the important messages stopped, it'll make a tough situation."

Herb Lane put in quietly: "Mebbe we better not make too much of it until we see whether this work is followed up tonight or tomorrow."

"Thet's the ticket," agreed Liligh. "It's hopin' against hope. Meanwhile I'll send a wagon back along the line unbeknownst to Creighton to repair those breaks."

"I agree it would be wiser not to tell the chief if we can help it," I put in earnestly. "I'm sure you've all noticed how strained and thin Creighton has become. He's lost more weight than any of us. He has had the physical work the same as all of us, but he has had also the mental and moral responsibility."

"Right," agreed Liligh. "Now, Shaw, yu an' the cowboys an' yu too, Cameron, scout back along the line at night an' see what yu kin find out. If anythin', report to me."

The construction work went on just as before, with our chieftain ignorant of the new depredation. That night at midnight Tom awakened me and on foot, bundled in our heavy coats and packing rifles, we scouted back along the line of five miles or more without seeing or hearing anything to excite our suspicion. Returning to camp, we awoke Shaw and Lowden. They brought in their horses, padded their hoofs, and made ready for their scout.

They rode away into the cold melancholy night without a sound of hoofs. Tom and I huddled over the little fire for a while, warming our hands and feet and then we went to bed. It was sunny and bright when we awakened.

While we were at breakfast the cowboys returned to camp, taking the precaution to ride in from the west, and each of them had the carcass of an antelope across his saddle. The meat was surely welcome but no doubt it was their intention to give the impression that they had been hunting. They unpacked and unsaddled, and had their breakfast without comment. Just afterward, Liligh and Lane and Bob Wainwright, who had been given the job of repairing the line the day before, sought us in eager anticipation.

"Wal, yu lean-faced Injun, what hev yu got to report?" demanded Liligh.

"Same thing, only wuss, I reckon," drawled Shaw, getting ready for a smoke.

"Wuss! How wuss? It couldn't be no wuss."

"Wal, boss, our pards Wayne an' Tom walked out last night, miles back of camp. They didn't come on anythin'. Then Jack an' I rode out with our hawsses, back about fifteen miles. We never seen nor heard anythin'. When we come back about five miles it got daylight an' we found three poles down with the wires cut an' insulators missin', same as the mawnin' before. These places were miles apart. After the last break the hawss tracks led off the trail to the north. I reckon it wouldn't be smart of us to show ourselves followin' them. These wire cutters are cute. Shore they'd be watchin' from some hidin'-place."

"Three poles down an' wires cut in three places!" exclaimed Liligh. "Purty soon the chief will wanta send messages an' how the hell is he gonna do it? Particularly when we don't want him to find out."

"Wal, Boss, I reckon we cain't help it," replied Shaw. "But we'll shore try hard. Jack an' I are liable to run foul of those hombres tonight, or soon anyway, an' we'll shore make it kinda hot for them."

But the odds were against the cowboys. Every night for three more nights they stalked the trail, while Tom and I went out on foot for half the night, all to no avail. And every night or early in the morning there were more telegraph poles cut down. The marauders added one pole on each successive night. During this period we progressed 15 miles nearer to the mining-district and camped the fourth night just this side of the hill beyond which lay the first gold diggings, Atlantic by name, which was a branch of South Pass a few miles farther on.

By this time almost all the men connected with the wagon train were aware of the depredations on the telegraph line, except Creighton. By some miracle we had been able to keep it from him.

That night Shaw and Lowden, as they reported to us in the morning, rode out early and scouted along the rough terrain north of the trail, and in extremely heavy timber they espied a tiny campfire blaze. They stole upon it like Indians. They tried to hold up the two men whom they found there, but a fight resulted in which one of the men was killed and the other escaped into the woods.

When the cowboys went on further and returned along the telegraph line, they found three more poles had been cut and the wires down, presumably by another crew of men whose tracks, the daylight disclosed,

were not the same as those of the earlier party. Shaw said there was something big behind it.

That day we ran the telegraph line over the hill almost as far as Atlantic and camped at the side of the trail on the ridge top. It had been a short day's work with only three miles of telegraph line laid. That gave me time to interest myself in this gold digging.

Viewed from the top of the hill where the trail went over, this place was a remarkable one to see and wholly different from anything I had pictured. I faced a deep, wide gulch down the side of which the trail wound, crossed a roaring stream, and zigzagged steeply up the other side. Here and there were patches of fir trees. Halfway down the slope began a cluster of innumerable, queer, unsightly, patchwork shacks, with tents interspersed between them. They led the eye down and down to bigger huts and finally large, crude board buildings, all facing down hill.

Parallel with the rushing white torrent and the trees which lined it ran an enormous ditch extending all the way up the gulch to the base of the mountain, and in this ditch and on its banks and everywhere around were active, moving men, so many and so colorful in their red shirts, and so apparently frenzied that they resembled an army of ants.

I made my way back to our wagon and burst upon my three comrades in excited raving about the gold diggings. I was trying to tell them what it looked like when Darnell, exclaiming, pointed out the arrival of the Pony Express rider. It was our friend Barnes and he was dismounting to deliver mail and dispatches into Creighton's hands. They conversed a few moments. Then Barnes left him and came running to us.

"Now what the hell is the matter with thet gazabo?" queried Shaw as he rose to his feet.

"Hyar, you cowboys, get your heads together with me," said Barnes as he came up to me. "I've got to go right away an' I've no time to say anythin' over twice. Shaw, I don't know if this concerns you more than Cameron or any of you, but listen. On my last trip west through South Pass, three, four days ago, I seen that girl Ruby that one or another of you was sweet on."

The cowboys seemed stricken dumb and I burst out with a loud exclamation.

"Wal," went on Barnes, his sharp gaze on Shaw, "I seen her an' she seen me. What's more, she recognized me. Her face lit up an' she waved, then somebody jerked her away from the winder, an' I'll say he jerked her! Don't look like that, cowboy. There's absolutely no doubt. I saw her plain an' besides Ruby *knew* me."

Strangely enough it was to me that Shaw turned in this poignant moment. His face was working convulsively and his clutch upon my arm was like a steel vise.

"Barnes," spoke up Lowden tersely, "*whar* did you see Ruby?"

"I don't know exact, Lowden. That's the hell of it," returned the express rider. "I was makin' tracks an' I like to show off in town an' I seen her just as I flashed by. It was about halfway down the road from the express station in that row of houses all tucked together on the side of the street where the brook runs. It was upstairs, don't forget

that. Comin' back today I looked sharp all along from the big gamblin'-hall with the decorated upstairs porch an' I seen half a dozen winders, any one of which could be where I seen Ruby. Good luck an' good-by."

In a moment or two Shaw pulled himself together. "Pard, I reckon we'll have to forget about telegraph wires for a spell," he said curtly. "Jack, get the hawsses an' saddle up."

In the few moments during which I tried to collect my thoughts Vance and Jack were away down the hill toward the diggings at a brisk lope.

"Gosh, Tom!" I exclaimed. "We can't just sit here. What'll we do?"

"I reckon we ought to follow them," he replied. "It don't worry me none. With this beard I'm growin' I would-n't be recognized in South Pass. I'll get my hoss. You can ride an' I'll walk."

"No. We'll both walk if we can't find some other way to get over there," I returned.

"There's wagons to and fro between the two camps every little bit. Buckle on your gun. If my hunch is right you're gonna need it. Put a handful of shells in your left coat pocket."

We began the descent of the can-yon just as Shaw and Lowden had reached the summit of the opposite slope and were riding on top, darkly silhouetted against the cloud of yel-low smoke that rose from the mill. Its huge red mass could be seen top-ping the horizon.

"Pard, you've seen some action so far on the frontier," Darnell was saying, "but what we're liable to get up against here may be different. Keep your head about you. Listen to me or watch me."

We climbed rapidly down the slope and soon reached the line of shacks. Some of the little houses were hardly large enough for a man to turn around inside. They all had stovepipe chimneys sticking out of their make-shift roofs.

Passing through a broad belt of these huts, we came to a fairly wide street on the uphill side of which be-gan the larger and more commodious buildings. For every shop and store there were several saloons and they all bore rude, fantastic signs nailed up or painted above the doors.

Farther down where this street made a turn to cross the bridges over the ditch and the stream, there were still bigger houses, some of them painted and quite pretentious. One bore the name Miner's Rest, and the adjoining one, much larger, was named Gold Strike. The last building on that side appeared to be a good-sized merchandise store. I went in and accosted a middle-aged man of rather important bearing, evidently the merchant.

"I'd like to inquire if you know any-thing of a Colonel Sunderlund who just recently located in the Sweet-water Valley on a ranch not far from here?"

"Yes," came the ready reply. "Sun-derlund has been here several times, the last time only yesterday."

"Does this road go to his ranch?"

"Straight as a beeline. You can't miss it. The ranch is in plain sight from where the road opens out into the valley."

"Thanks very much. And about how much of a drive?"

"Well, Sunderlund drives it in less than an hour, but that black team of his is a fast-stepping one."

I returned to Tom. We talked a

few moments, taking opportunity to look all about us and not missing anything. Presently an empty wagon came along. We hailed the driver and he cheerfully bade us pile in. We did so and I found a seat on some bags while Tom leaned against the driver's seat and plied him with questions.

It was about mid-afternoon and the sloping sun was losing its warmth. The ascent on that side of the gulch was less precipitous and at times our view downhill was intercepted by clumps of pine trees. When we got to the top, however, we could see that all along the stream as far up as our sight would carry were miners working like beavers. There was not an open space along the stream where there were not two or three men on each side standing in the water.

The big gold mill at once claimed our undivided attention. It belched huge clouds of yellow and black smoke. Long before we reached it we heard the roar of machinery and presently we espied many workmen passing to and fro.

Below the mill the road sloped down and curved to the left around a spur of hill on which were numerous shacks such as we had passed in Atlantic. When we turned the curve the driver informed us that here was South Pass. And it burst upon my bewildered sight like nothing more than a comic-opera scene on a grand scale. There was one wide street as far as we could see and two lines of buildings of every imaginable color, some of them even being blue or pink. The road and the narrow board sidewalks were congested with moving forms. On one side there were vehicles all the way down.

"Here's a livery stable, if you gents want to hire rigs," the driver informed us. "That gray stone building up the hill a ways is the bank. The big frame house on the left is the general store where you can buy anything, and across from it on the corner is the best hotel. I suppose you young gents will buck the tiger?"

"We probably will if we can find any place that's running a small enough game to fit our pocketbooks."

"Well, there's all kinds of games and I'm giving you a hunch most of them are crooked. Stay out of the dens 'way down the road. The fine-looking ones are bad enough."

We thanked the driver and descended in front of the big store. The wide steps running around this building afforded us a better vantage place than the hotel across the street and we chose that for our first stop. There was a motley stream of humanity passing up and down the street, for the most part miners in rough colorful garb. But we noted many different types of people and, to our surprise, a number of women.

The store behind us was well patronized. I looked at each pedestrian with a quick glance that did not register anything. I was in a hurry for something to happen, just what I knew not.

The instant I saw a brunette girl standing in the doorway of the store and gazing at me with startled dark eyes, I knew that whatever I had anticipated was now beginning. The girl recognized me. She started impulsively out of the doorway and then halted, nervously gazing all around as if she feared to be seen.

"Look, Tom. There's that girl, Flo," I whispered, nudging Darnell. I hurried to the girl's side and Tom fol-

lowed me. Addressing her eagerly, I said, "Hello, Flo. Of course you remember us."

"Yes, you're Mr. Cameron and I recognize your cowboy friend too," she replied, hurriedly. "I've been looking for you boys to come through this place for weeks."

"Thank goodness, Flo. That must mean you're still our friend. The Pony Express rider, Barnes, told us he had seen Ruby here in South Pass. Shaw and Lowden are in town looking for her and so are we."

"Come inside the store. It'd be all my life is worth if I was caught talking to you," she said swiftly, and led us just inside the door where there was a small space between the counter and piles of merchandise that offered a little seclusion.

"Listen," she began. "Ruby was carried off from Julesburg the night of the Indian raid by Red Pierce and his men, and brought west to South Pass in a wagon train. She was here in town until a few days ago. Then Pierce moved her over to Atlantic. She is now kept in that new saloon and gambling-hell called the Gold Nugget. The first saloon on the left as you cross the bridge."

"Is she being held prisoner there?" I asked in a tense whisper.

"It amounts to that. She has tried to leave several times. Pierce has her guarded jealously."

"Does he mistreat her?"

"Yes, he has beaten her but she holds out against him. She told me she knew you cowboys would get here eventually and rescue her. Pierce finally fell in love with her and she was at her wit's end to keep him off. I told her to work on him—fool him—anything for the time, and so far, she has done it."

"But Ruby wrote she was married. I thought it might have been to Pierce," I interrupted.

"No, Ruby ain't married. The reason she left that note for Shaw the time of the Indian raid was 'cause a member of Red Pierce's gang Shaw didn't know, forced her. He trailed Ruby for Pierce and swore he'd shoot Shaw in the back while Shaw was shooting Indians if she didn't write that note. He told her what to say 'cause he overheard both of them talk about getting married that day."

"Has Pierce got a place in this town too?" I asked.

"I'll say he has. The Four Aces saloon and gambling-place is next to the biggest one."

"Tell us more," I went on hurriedly. "Is Pierce here now?"

"He is. Sitting in a private game, but only his own men know him under the name of Red Pierce here. He's known as Bill Howard."

"Then it's the same old game, saloon and gambling-hall and girls?"

"Don't fool yourself, Cameron. This saloon and gambling-hall stuff is poor potatoes for Pierce. He has bigger ideas than that. Only last night I heard him talking to men, one of them his right-hand man, Black Thornton. They've got a big deal here but just what it is, I don't know. I think it's a bank-robbing job and maybe a wholesale robbery of the miners. They want to make a clean sweep and then go on west to the California diggings."

"Tom, we're on the right track," I whispered. "Big deal! Clean sweep! Flo, could Pierce by any chance be mixed up with this systematic cutting of the telegraph line that we've been

up against for days?"

"I can answer that one. I've heard them talk. Pierce said he didn't mind the telegraph line coming through here eventually, but he wants to stall it off until he can pull his big deal. He doesn't want any messages sent back over that wire to Ft. Laramie to get the soldiers here. Some of the big men here are trying to have a sheriff to bring law and order."

"That's the answer, Tom," I returned, hurriedly. "Flo, bless your heart. You are a friend in need. We won't forget it."

"Pard, you're wastin' time. Flo, tell us once more how we can find Ruby," concluded Darnell.

"I know exactly where she is. There's a big loft over that Gold Nugget and it has been partitioned off into rooms. There's a door and a stairway to the right when you enter the saloon. You go up that stair to a narrow hall with rooms on each side, and I think that Ruby's is the farthest on the left. Anyway, you can find her easily enough. Good luck to you. And—don't forget me."

"I shore won't!" was Darnell's surprising reply.

We stalked out of the store. By tacit consent we faced up the street toward Atlantic. Darnell said the first thing we'd need would be a buckboard and a team of horses. We must not waste time in trying to find Shaw. We hired a vehicle from the bearded livery-stable man and with Darnell at the reins we were trotting up the hill in short order.

We drove down the slope into the town, across the bridge, passed the big store, up to the hitching-rail in front of the Gold Nugget. There were discordant music inside, the hum of a roulette wheel, the clink of glasses and loud laughter.

When we entered the wide door of the saloon, we saw a large, gaudy, newly furnished room with a string of miners lined up at the bar and a few gamblers at the wheel. Otherwise the hall was empty. We sauntered in and no one paid any attention to us. There was the doorway to the right and I caught a glimpse of steep stairs. In a moment we were climbing them. We reached the corridor and tiptoed all the way down to the last door on the left. I knocked on this door. We heard something, yet could not distinguish what it was.

"Ruby," I called in a low tone, "are you there?"

We heard a rustle, soft feet thud on the floor, then an answering voice: "Yes, I'm Ruby and I'm here. Who are you?"

"It's Cameron, and Darnell is with me," I called back. "We've come to take you away."

"Oh, Wayne—Wayne—I knew you boys would find me, but I'm locked in—a prisoner! I can't get out!"

"Stand back to one side—away from the door!"

I braced myself against the opposite wall and flung all my weight powerfully against the door. It was a flimsy affair and the lock was not strong. My first onslaught almost did the trick. At my second plunge the door flew off the lock and hinges and went smashing to the floor of a tiny room. My impetus carried me into the room while Tom guarded the door. Then I saw Ruby. Her face was as white as a sheet and her big eyes seemed bottomless gulfs. I picked her up and carried her out into the corridor.

"Pard, we gotta rustle," whispered Darnell, his gun out. "They heard that crash below an' we can look for trouble. Keep behind me."

He ran to the top of the stairway and as I came up to him I saw a dark man bounding up the stairs. He and Tom began to shoot at the same instant. I heard bullets strike flesh. Above the red flash of gunfire below us, I recognized Black Thornton's face. He let out a mortal yell, and flinging his gun which banged on the landing below, he tried to hold to the wall but Darnell, stepping down, kicked him loose, and he plunged down the stairs to land with a thud that jarred the house.

I kept at Tom's heels. There were shouts from the saloon. I heard heavy footfalls. When Darnell stepped over the prostrate body of the dead man, I saw that he was unsteady on his feet. He had been hit. But keeping in front of me, he reached back with his left hand and dragged me over the dead man out into the saloon. The heavy footfalls belonged to a man I knew, the one I had fought in the saloon at Gothenburg. He had a gun in his hand and on his dark face there was a look of surprise.

"None of that," he bawled, and he fired an instant after Darnell's gun exploded. But Darnell was sagging and his shot went low. He let go of me to hang on to the door and he kept deliberately in front of me, using his body as a shield to protect Ruby. This second assailant kept firing again and again. The bullets made a sickening thud as they struck Darnell.

"Bore him, pard," he called in a strangled voice.

I had shifted the girl to my left arm and had drawn my gun. I was quick to lean away from Darnell and shoot the man. His gun dropped to the floor, and both his hands went to his middle. He plunged face downward in front of us. And the next instant Darnell also fell, his gun clattering, and his last choking gasp was: *"Rustle!"*

I ran out of the saloon, lifted Ruby into the front seat and tearing the reins free, I leaped in beside her and pulled that team away from the rail and turned it into the road that ran down the gulch. We had not gotten many rods before there came shouts and shots from the saloon door but the bullets sped harmlessly by, kicking up the dust around us, and in another moment we were speeding out of sight behind the bank.

Chapter Fourteen

Two Little Pieces of Wire

THE road led straight down the gulch for what appeared to be miles without another vehicle in sight. The team of bays were fresh, and, as I held them back, they settled into a swift pace that drew the buckboard rapidly along. With almost anything on wheels I saw that I could hold my lead, but saddle horses might be available at once near the Gold Nugget and they, of course, could overhaul me before I got to the valley.

The road was fairly good, hard-packed with only occasional dips or bumps. When the buckboard presently went over a bump with a jar, the unconscious girl slid off the seat to the floor. Holding the reins tight with

my right hand, with my left I covered her with a buffalo robe.

The team was flying down the road. I had to hold back hard to keep them to an even pace. Not for an interval that seemed endless did I turn around again to look back. Still no one in sight! I had traveled five miles or more from the gold diggings and the turn of the road was close. As I made it I saw another long straight stretch. Its end was marked by a widening and flattening of the sides of the gulch and a void which I knew must be the valley.

Twice more in the next few miles I turned to see if I was pursued. When I saw that I was not, there came a sudden change in my feelings. At that moment Ruby stirred at my feet and called out my name. I replied, bending over to assure her that we had escaped, and that we were almost certain to be safe presently.

"But, Tom—what of him?" she cried.

"Don't think about that, Ruby," I replied unsteadily.

"Where is Vance?"

"He and Jack are in South Pass searching for you. It was Barnes who told us that he had seen you in a window. I ran into Flo. She told me about you—where to find you."

"Wayne, where are you taking me?"

"To the Sunderlund ranch down here in the valley. Ruby, are you all right?"

"Yes, I guess—so. I feel sort of stunned. Can you cover my feet? They're freezing."

I reached down and tucked the heavy buffalo robe around her feet and then under and around her head. She was better off lying there, especially in the event of pursuers attacking me. She did not speak again. I directed all my attention to driving the mettlesome team.

Several times I could not resist the temptation to look down upon Ruby, to see her white face and wide dark eyes and bright hair against the buffalo robe. Once she smiled at me. It was such a tender, such a pitiful little smile, with its gratitude and hope, that I dared not look again. But I did look back. No vehicle—no horsemen! I had almost reached the valley without anyone on my trail. And again the thought of Tom Darnell assailed me, and again I fought it off. It was creeping, insidious, strength-taking.

The road made another turn and then opened into the wide Sweetwater Valley. A couple of miles or more out in the valley, which was level and purple in hue, the river was marked by a heavy line of willows and cottonwoods, their tips reflecting the last golden rays of the setting sun.

As I neared the river I made out a log bridge spanning it and the curve of the road as it wound to the left up the slope to the back of the bluff. Soon I drove across this bridge. Halfway up the slope I noted horses and cattle grazing out in the sage, but I could not see the ranch house until I surmounted the bluff.

Some distance ahead there was a signpost too far for me to discern what was written upon it. As I drove up to the house I saw saddle horses standing with bridles down, and a buckboard with a team very like the one I was driving. There were several men gathered there who suddenly became keenly interested in my approach. One of these was Colonel Sunderlund.

As I pulled the team to a quick halt, Sunderlund recognizing me, stepped forward exclaiming: "Why, if it isn't Cameron! What in the world brings you heah? Ah! Yo're pale and—"

"Hello, Colonel," I replied. "Don't be startled. I'm all right. I have a girl here in the buckboard. You will remember—my pard Shaw's sweetheart. There was a fight. Darnell was killed, I'm afraid. Will you call your daughter? I want to beg her to look after Ruby until Shaw comes for her."

I leaped out of the buckboard, and raising Ruby from her position half under the seat, I wrapped her more securely in the buffalo robe and lifted her out. As I turned I heard Sunderlund calling his daughter. I mounted the porch and heard Sunderlund talking rapidly and Kit's wondering exclamations. Then I confronted her.

"Kit, there's been the devil to pay," I said. "You remember Vance's girl, Ruby? Well, here she is, and I want you to take her in and look after her until I can find Shaw and we can get back."

"Wayne Cameron! Always rescuing some girl!"

"Kit!" I expostulated. "Darnell was killed. He sacrificed his life for Ruby, and Shaw is running amuck in South Pass. I've got to get back."

"Oh, Wayne!" she cried. "Bring Ruby in. I shall be only too happy to take care of her."

I carried the girl into a room that blazed at me with its bright lights and colors and I laid her down upon a couch. "Ruby, you're all right now," I said earnestly. "I must hurry back to South Pass—to find Shaw and Jack and tell them you are safe."

Kit detained me at the door a moment. I kissed her warmly, held her tight a second, telling her I would come back soon, possibly before the construction work was finished. Then I tore myself free and hurried away with Sunderlund tagging at my heels.

"Colonel, is there any way I can get to South Pass without going back to Atlantic?"

"Yes. Take the road to the left just across the bridge. It's only four miles farther and it's a much better road. But take my man Wilson with you. He'll drive and you can make better time."

During that swift ride in the cold piercing wind I plied Sunderlund's cowboy with innumerable questions, more to escape from my own feeling than to get actual news of the valley and South Pass. But I learned more in that ride than I possibly could in any other way in so short a time.

As we drove down the long descent leading into South Pass and crossed the bridge, I instructed Wilson to drive to the livery stable.

The grizzled livery-stable man greeted me with much more effusion and acclaim than I thought was due me, even if he had learned about the fight over at the Gold Nugget. His first words proved to me that he not only knew about Darnell but also about Shaw and Lowden.

"Them cowboys rode up the hill just about dark," he said, "an' they left this town split wide open. They played lightning and thunder in half the dens in town. Those cowboys' deal was to make these gamblers and house owners talk—tell them where some man named Red Pierce had hidden some girl. But they never found her.

"The man they called Red Pierce

turned out to be Bill Howard. I was in the Four Aces when it happened. Howard or Pierce had got hold of the biggest hall in town—I never heared such a row in my life. Men yellin', guns crackin', chairs and tables and poker chips and coins clashin'! I ran in there to find a crowd of gamesters spillin' away from the two fire-eyed cowboys who had Howard on the floor. Two of his men were dead, but Howard was still alive. He had been all shot up.

"Shaw was orderin' him to tell where he kept that girl. Howard swore she was at the Gold Nugget, over in Atlantic. Shaw didn't believe him. I heard Shaw tell Howard he'd let him off if he'd tell the truth, and Howard, gaspin' and pantin', half sittin' there in his blood with both arms broke and hangin' limp, told the same story.

"I don't know if Shaw believed him even then but he an' the other one left. They rode off, then, up the hill and that's all I know."

"We'll go on to Atlantic and the construction camp," I decided.

"I reckon I'll ride over with you, if you don't mind," said our informant, and clambered into the back seat. "Wilson, take it easy up this steep hill, but push the horses when we get on top," he directed.

When we got down into the gulch and across the bridge we saw a crowd of men in front of the Gold Nugget. I bade Wilson stop outside the circle of light, and, getting out of the buckboard, I said I would hold the horses while they went in to see if they could find out any more news.

Wilson and the livery-stable man were gone what seemed a very few moments. When they returned we all got in the buckboard and resumed our journey.

"Shaw and Lowden were here early in the evening," said Wilson. "They threw guns on the gang in there but didn't do any shooting. They found out pronto that the girl had been taken away and the body of your dead pard was laying outside. The cowboys lifted him over a saddle and went off up the road."

The certainty of Darnell's death at last broke down my resistance and I sat there in my buffalo robe, shivering with grief and regret. I had only partially recovered when we reached the construction camp. There were bright campfires burning and men sitting in groups all around. Liligh was the one who met me and he held to my arm while he told me that the cowboys had just buried Darnell over beyond the edge of the trail.

"Did Creighton hear about this awful thing?" I queried.

"Yes. Shore he heard. But, at thet, he was about the last one. It spread like wildfire."

I sought out Wilson, and giving him messages for Sunderlund and Kit and Ruby, I told him to go back. Then I hurriedly strode over to our wagon and to the little campfire around which the two cowboys were sitting smoking. They got up to greet me and at first it was a silent welcome, the simplicity of which was emphasized by the powerful grip of their hands.

"Vance, I took Ruby—over to Sunderlund's—for Kit to take care of her," I began. "Ruby was all right. She'll be well cared for there until you go after her."

"Pard, I reckon I never thanked God for my good luck," he replied, quietly. "But I'm goin' to begin now

an' be grateful for such a pard as you. Tell us now all about the fight you had when Tom got his everlastin'."

Stirred to my depths, I related that story in detail.

"It's just too bad me an' Jack wasn't with you," was the cowboy's comment.

A little later I stood out of the circle of campfire light by the freshly made mound which was Tom Darnell's grave. It was alongside the old Oregon Trail, on a high barren ridge where it was lonely and desolate and the wind mourned through the shrubs and sage and the great black mountain frowned down, and the white stars blinked pitilessly.

The next morning Creighton came over when we were having breakfast and said abruptly, "Shaw, I want you and Cameron to take the day off."

Shaw looked at me and said, "Wal, Wayne, cain't you understand your orders? You an' me are ridin' pronto over to the Sunderlund ranch."

On arriving, Kit ran up to me and Ruby ran up to Shaw, but Kit and I did not embrace, both of us feeling that this moment belonged to the reunion of Shaw and Ruby.

After giving Ruby a hearty kiss, Shaw turned to me. "Wayne, you old tenderfoot, don't you realize we have to get back to Creighton and our telegraph line?"

"What's your hurry, Vance? You haven't seen Ruby in Lord knows when."

"As sure as God made little apples, I guess I'll have to keep figuring things out for you the rest of my life. The sooner we get back on the job, the sooner that piece of iron wire will reach Ft. Bridger, and the sooner you and I will be married."

"And you were the one who was talking about obeying orders," I laughed.

That same day the Western Union crossed the gulch where the Atlantic miners cheered as it passed, went up the hill and down into South Pass.

That night I tramped the single indescribable street of South Pass for hours on end but I did not enter one of the saloons or gambling-hells or do anything but look. I met Flo on the street. She was sorrowful over Tom Darnell's death, but the killing of Red Pierce and his minions had liberated her as it had Ruby. She told me there was a young miner who wanted her to marry him.

Next morning Creighton and his wagon trains rolled out of South Pass bound on the last lap of their journey. I drove our wagon. The sky was overcast and the wind that whipped from the peaks was piercing and cold. We were caught by a blinding snowstorm before we could cross the high flat of the pass.

Perhaps it was the irony of fate that a big wagonload of Creighton's telegraph poles was instrumental in averting a tragedy. We built a bonfire of those logs and kept it burning all night while the storm raged. The gale blew out by morning and the snow ceased and the sun rose dazzlingly upon a changed white world.

We forged on and the next day reached the purple sage country, where rapid progress with the line could once more be made.

We had beaten the winter. We covered the last 150 miles of our tele-

graph trek in 16 days, including the crossing of the Green River.

At last, historic old Ft. Bridger appeared before us, with its stone walls almost hidden among the grove of cottonwoods and its meandering branches of the Black River running before and behind the fort, where we already knew the Mormons were to meet us.

It seemed ages from the time when we saw the first pole of the western division of the telegraph construction pop up on the horizon until the Mormons had run the wire down into the valley. Creighton's big hands trembled as he climbed aloft our last telegraph pole and connected the wires. The expression on our chieftain's face beggared description. What a moment for him!

Yet there was another delay before Creighton could rejoice—before Western Union had spanned the continent. The crew working east from Sacramento toward Salt Lake City had been held up.

We waited four more interminable days, Shaw and I champing at the bit, so to speak, to be on our way. In the meantime a temporary shelter had been erected and our telegraph operator sat hour by hour at his little table before his instrument waiting for the final word. At last this came late in the afternoon. We all stood motionless and silent as Creighton awaited to intercept, en route, the first official transcontinental telegraph message from Stephen J. Field, Chief Justice of California.

Finally the long-awaited telegram passed through Ft. Bridger. The operator wrote it down and handed it to our chieftain. Our task was finally done. Creighton trembled as he read the message aloud to us:

"To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States: In the temporary absence of the Governor of the State, I am requested to send you the first message which will be transmitted over the wires of the telegraph line which connects the Pacific with the Atlantic States. The people of California desire to congratulate you upon the completion of the great work. They believe that it will be the means of strengthening the attachment which binds both the East and the West to the Union, and they desire in this—the first message across the continent—to express their loyalty to the Union and their determination to stand by its Government on this its day of trial. They regard that Government with affection and will adhere to it under all fortunes. (Signed) Stephen J. Field, Chief Justice of California."

Almost immediately another message came through from Mayor Teschermacher, San Francisco, to Mayor Wood, New York City: *The Pacific to the Atlantic sends greetings, and may both oceans be dry before a foot of all the land that lies between them shall belong to any other than our united country.*

"You know," whispered Shaw to me, "this damn silence is a hell of a sight louder than any stampede I've ever heard—and a damn sight more pleasing to my ears."

Suddenly a hand touched my shoulder and I turned around to see Kit Sunderlund's father.

"Gentlemen," he said to Shaw and me, "I shore drove a long way to get here in time for this little ceremony. I'd have missed had it not been for your eight-day wait. However, I don't

suppose either of you wants to listen to the prattlings of an old man like me. But say, now that this is all through, I wonder if you'll both come over to the fort? There's somethin' I want to show you."

Shaw and I followed the Colonel into the fort. Despite its being so late in the year, the enclosure was carpeted with yellow flowers. The air had a tang but the sunlight seemed mellow like Indian summer back home.

Standing by the well were two figures. Shaw halted in his tracks as if he had been shot. I looked but did not believe my eyes.

The two figures ran toward us, enveloped us. They were Kit Sunderlund and Ruby.

"Oh, Wayne, we wanted to see the joining of the wires, but we wanted to surprise you too," Kit said.

I heard incoherent mumblings beside us, some of which sounded like Vance and some like Ruby, except that his voice held something I had never before heard in it.

"I just can't believe this," I managed to breathe.

"Dad didn't want us to make the long trip because of storms, but we just wouldn't stay home," Kit went on.

Suddenly Creighton appeared, his voice booming ahead of him. "Wayne! Vance! I've been looking all over for you. Congratulations!" He shook hands all around.

Then he went on: "Now that this telegraph job is finished, mark my words, the railroad will be next. But according to my good friend the Colonel here, you boys will be mighty busy raising cattle. I'm going in for that myself and Colonel Sunderlund is going to handle them for me. With Vance and you on the job, I won't be worrying." And with that he walked away.

"Wal, ain't thet just like Edward Creighton," Vance drawled. "Telegraph, railroad, cattle! His work ain't never done."

"Look, boys," Kit broke in. She was pointing toward the long row of telegraph poles with the wire and the sun shining on it, diminishing in the distance.

"Just look as far as you can see," I said to all of them and to myself too, "and then remember the many tortuous miles beyond and all the tremendous difficulties we encountered in order that what happened today could happen."

"Yes," drawled Vance, "shootin' an' fires an' thunder an' stampedes an' Indians an' all, just to bring a little piece of iron wire to meet another little piece of iron wire."

THE END

Five Lives for a Drink

Story by
CARL SMITH

Pictures by
NICHOLAS S. FIRFIRES

THE RAILROAD MAN *refuses to buy the Texas gambler a drink—an occurrence of small consequence, one might think. But it happens in a trail's-end town in 1871, when such a simple thing is liable to be interpreted as a mortal insult, so the consequence is a savage gun fight between rival factions! This ZGWM picture story is based on fact.*

The dapper little gambler had a Texas accent, a derringer in his waistband, and a skinful of red whisky. He walked over to the table where Mike McCluskie, railroader, sat drinking alone in the Red Front saloon. "McCluskie, yo're goin' to buy me a drink." The husky young railroader looked up and gave the gambler a contemptuous glance. "Go to hell, Bill Bailey," he said. There was a blow—an overturned table.

The fight swept through the saloon and moved out to the street. There the gambler fell, a slug from McCluskie's six-gun in his heart. McCluskie fled and camped out of town for a few days, until a friend brought word that Mike was not wanted by the law. The sheriff had pronounced it a square shooting.

This was Newton, Kansas, in 1871, when the town was trail's end for the herds of Texas cattle. Gun fights, if square, were of little concern to the law, but the town was full of Texans who hung together. Hugh Anderson, a member of one of the trail outfits and a friend of Bailey's, swore revenge on McCluskie.

The railroaders stuck together too. On Mike's return, he was warned by his friend, Jim Riley, that the Texans were talking about "getting" him. "We'll see," said Mike and, buckling on his gun, he walked across town to Perry Tuttle's dance hall. McCluskie was interested in one of the girls working there.

Word got around among the Texans that Mike was at his usual table in Tuttle's. The evening passed as quietly—or as riotously—as usual. It was about two a.m. when Perry announced closing-hour. As the customers were drifting out, a Texan came over to Mike's table and brought up the subject of Bailey.

McCluskie watched the Texan closely, which was what had been counted on. Suddenly Mike found Hugh Anderson standing at the table, his gun already in his hand. Anderson, a friend of the notorious Texas killer, Wes Hardin, wasted few words. "You murderin' son, I'm goin' to kill yuh!" he snarled.

A Texan named Martin ran up and tried to stop him, but with deliberate aim Anderson pulled the trigger. A .45 slug tore through McCluskie's neck. With the grimace of death on his face, Mike rose, drawing his gun. Life ebbed before he could raise it, and the shot ripped into the floor as he fell.

McCluskie lay crumpled at Anderson's feet. The Texan bent, put the muzzle of his gun against the spine of the fallen man, and fired again. As the echoes of the gun's roar died there came a deathlike silence. "Let's get out of here," a Texan muttered. "You're a little late," said a taut voice behind them.

Mike's friend, Jim Riley, stood tight-lipped between the Texans and the door, revolver in hand. He was backed up by three or four tough railroaders. After surveying the Texans coldly for an instant, Riley opened fire. The dance hall veritably seemed to explode with gun flame and the roar of heavy Colts.

The Texans had taken the precaution of posting men at the windows. Glass crashed as they poked the muzzles of their guns through the panes. Streaks of flame criss-crossed the dance hall, and the cries of the wounded and the dying mingled with the roar of six-guns and the sharp crack of rifles.

Among the first to fall was Martin, the Texan who had tried to make peace. Shot through the neck, he staggered out of Tuttle's, reeled across the street choking on his own blood, and died in the doorway of a saloon. Hugh Anderson fell heavily to the floor, a leg bone splintered by a heavy slug.

When the last shot had been fired and silence settled over the dance hall, the toll revealed was appalling. Inside, McCluskie, another of the railroad men, and one of the Texans were dead or dying. Outside, Martin lay dead. Anderson and three other Texans were wounded, as were two of Riley's friends.

Anderson and his wounded friends were carried to the rear of a store which was barricaded as the crowd of Texans milled around the streets in an ugly mood. Tom Carson, the marshal, nephew of the famous Kit and former deputy under Wild Bill Hickok, was threatened with death if he arrested Anderson.

Citizens of the town patrolled the streets. Newton became an armed camp, with an explosive tension in the air. The following night, Anderson's friends carried him secretly from the store and smuggled him aboard a train. Carson searched it before it pulled out, but Anderson had been well hidden.

The first hint Newton authorities had that Anderson had been spirited away was an account in the Kansas City papers of his arrival there. Violent events followed so fast on each other in the roaring cow town that the shooting was history in a few days. No extradition of Anderson was sought.

Anderson was patched up by the Kansas City doctors and soon limped off to Texas. In Newton, five new mounds rose among the graves on Boot Hill, down by the little creek on First Street. Under them were Mike McCluskie; Bill Bailey, the gambler; two Texans, Martin and Hank Kearnes; and a railroader named Pat Lee. So ended a famous cow-town battle that took the lives of five men—and it all began over a glass of whisky that was never poured and never drunk.

THE TIGHT-FISTED, *unscrupulous partners who control the frontier village of Seaburg, unable to understand the friendliness which Schoolmaster Alfred Stone shows the surrounding tribes, scoff at his warning that an Indian attack is in the offing. Tragic fulfillment of that warning follows—and Schoolmaster Stone puts into effect a suggestion unwittingly made by his bitterest enemy. This story has never been published before.*

Schoolmaster Stone Lights the Way

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

A LIGHT tap on the lean-to door galvanized Alfred Stone into action. He closed the book he had been reading and pushed the button lamp away from the edge of the table. He took down the long-barreled rifle from above the hearth, stepped to the door, and lifted the heavy oak bar from its slots.

"Mary Brice," Stone said, gently chiding, "I warned you—"

"I know, Alfred," the girl said, entering. "But I overheard something this evening. Indians or no Indians, I *had* to come."

Stone barred the door and leaned the rifle against the wall, while Mary whipped off the Paisley shawl that hooded her head and shoulders. He

drew up a barrel chair and held it for her. The soft lamplight filtered through her brown hair, illuminating it with a warm glow, and outlining her profile. He noted the slender hands, the long, tapering fingers, and the full bosom. The girl sat down then, a little breathless, agitated.

Mary waited until Stone returned to his chair, hands clasping and unclasping in her lap. Then she asked, "The Indian—he came again?"

Stone smiled to ease her anxiety. "Not yet, Mary. His absence might, however, be a good omen."

"Then you don't think—"

"The danger is still very real. That is why I told you it would be inadvisable to be out alone. There is another matter too, Mary, of someone seeing you. I am now under constant surveillance. I wouldn't want anything to happen—"

"I know, Alfred. But I told you—"

"That you had overheard something. Is it of such importance that you must take this risk?"

"Yes," the girl replied. She moved over to the hearth and began sweeping it with the homemade broom.

Stone stretched out a hand. "Must you do that, Mary? Sit down again and tell me all about it."

"I can't sit still," she said nervously. "I've *got* to keep busy. Mr. Webster dined at the Walsh home this evening."

Stone smiled wanly. "And, of course, I was the main topic of conversation."

"I couldn't help overhearing part of it," Mary went on hurriedly. "Alfred, they're not going to let you teach school any longer. I've been afraid this would happen—you being so outspoken, so utterly different from other men."

The smile vanished, and Stone said, "In that Walsh and Webster can't twist me around their little fingers? Well, let them get rid of me, if they can. There are other jobs in Seaburg."

Mary laid aside the broom and came over to him, her bosom heaving as she spoke rapidly. "Alfred, these men own this townsite, own the very building you teach and live in. No man in Seaburg dares to hire you, without their consent. You'll have to leave."

Stone said to her, "Walsh and his partner *might* eventually run me out of the settlement, aided by their hand-picked councilmen—but they'll know they've been in a fight."

The girl stood there, watching him for a moment in silence, a wistful expression in her blue eyes. Once her lips parted, as if about to speak, then closed tightly. Again she took up the broom and brushed the sweepings against the dying embers on the hearth. She stood with her back to him, hesitant. Then she whirled, and the changed expression in her eyes brought Stone slowly to his feet.

Words poured from her, not too distinctly. "I know it's unseemly, not—not maidenly, to say this. But I *must* tell you now—Alfred, I love you! If they drive you away, let me—let me go with you!"

She came to him, even while he stared at her in amazement, flung her arms around his neck, pressed a tear-damp cheek against his. His arms went around her, not tightly. He had not suspected this.

It hurt him when he realized that he had no security to offer this girl, who had begun to attend his weekly

night class, shortly after he had started teaching in the frontier school, on her one free evening from her duties in the Walsh household. Like many pioneer girls, she could neither read nor write. Her ambition to acquire an education, together with a pronounced aptitude, had won Stone's respect and admiration. He now realized it was more than that.

However, he felt that he must not allow her to suspect his true feelings toward her yet. Walsh and Webster might force him to leave and, in that event, he did not want the girl to share his defeat. Better to write to her afterward, explaining his feelings toward her, and ask her to wait for him until he had become established.

His arms tightened a little around her and his voice shook as he said, "I'm honored, Mary, by your declaration. For the present, however, I'm not at liberty to accept any girl's love. Come—we'd better be going, before you are missed."

She drew away from him, cheeks flaming, eyes cast down. She put on her shawl in silence. Stone caught up his rifle, blew out the lamp, and opened the door.

Together, they stepped out into the night and paused, listening intently. Cabin windows glared balefully at them from the gradually sloping land leading to the Puget Sound shoreline. From Commercial Street, fronting on the Walsh and Webster wharves, came the faint echo of a shot, probably from the pistol of some celebrating inebriate in one of the saloons.

Hand in hand, Mary and Stone followed the trail along the ridge of the hogback, moving cautiously, silently, toward the Walsh home. Once Stone paused and looked in the direction of Fort Seaburg, a scant two miles to the east, beyond the hogback.

"I'm glad," he whispered, "that Captain Houghton and his troop returned today."

Mary whispered back, "Yes, it gives one a feeling of security."

Stone muttered, "Ah, more than that—much more."

Presently the outlines of a frame house loomed large in the night. The front room windows cast yellow oblongs of light on a well-kept lawn. The rear rooms were in darkness, and in that direction the couple turned.

Mary opened the back door quietly and passed through without a whispered word. Stone returned to the lean-to and, for a long time, sat thinking, yet with head turned sideways, as if expecting a caller. At last he went to bed, a hand resting on the long rifle beside him.

Stone saw them approaching the log schoolhouse, followed by the somewhat awed and curious glances of the pupils, who had just been dismissed. Robert Walsh, very tall and thin, had to stoop to enter. His eyes were gray, furtive, searching. The pallor of his long face was enhanced by his black broadcloth suit. The beaver hat made him appear even taller and thinner, in grotesque contrast to John Webster, his partner, who was fat, dumpy, moon-faced, a man given to strutting in an effort to compensate for his lack of stature.

They came silently down the aisle between the benches and stood before Stone. With a curt nod, Walsh spoke abruptly in a toneless voice.

"We've decided to dispense with your services."

"That's right, Stone," Webster echoed, in a high-pitched, squeaky voice. "We'll dispense with your services."

When Stone's silence became embarrassing, Walsh went on hurriedly. "You frequent saloons—a bad example for the children."

"Yes, a very bad example," Webster parroted.

A white ring circled Stone's lips as he demanded coldly, "Come to the point, gentlemen. You did not consider an occasional drink of liquor, imported from 'Frisco by the great house of Walsh and Webster, a crime when you hired me to teach here in Seaburg."

Walsh did not attempt to curb his rising anger when he said imperiously, "One of my barkentines will make port within the week, Stone. I'll arrange for your passage to 'Frisco. You will call at my office for the ticket."

He then turned and passed down the aisle, with Webster following at his heels like a well-trained dog. They had almost reached the door when Stone's voice halted him.

"Walsh, you owe something to the people of this settlement."

Walsh retorted, "When I wish to be reminded of my duty, I'll consult you. Until then—"

Stone, advancing, interrupted him sharply. "I'm reminding you of it, now."

"Such infernal impudence!" Webster puffed.

Stone said to Walsh, "You induced these people to come West. You built this school for their children and hired me to run it. They and their parents have the right to expect you to continue it. And I propose to remain here until you secure a qualified teacher to take my place."

Walsh's voice rose echoingly in the empty schoolroom: "You'll get out of here immediately, Stone, or *I'll burn down the building!*"

Stone said tauntingly, "I don't doubt you'd go to such lengths to achieve your ends; it's right in line with the policy you have followed since establishing yourself as lord of all you survey—including the Indians and their lands."

Walsh was beside himself now. "Damn your impertinence, sir! Why, you have come, uninvited, to council meetings and given numerous exhibitions of your ignorance concerning Indian affairs."

Stone said evenly, "Where I came from, council meetings were open to those concerned with good government, which is something this settlement lacks."

Turning on his heel, Walsh threw over his shoulder, "I've endured enough of your insults."

Stone grasped his arm and swung him around. Walsh jerked free, but the determined expression in the teacher's eyes held him. A gasp of astonishment came from Webster.

Stone said, "Walsh, you and your henchmen have winked at open violence, even bloodshed, against the Nisqualies, driving some off their choicest lands. The motive is obvious—the more white settlers there are in the territory, the more store goods you can sell. Indians are poor customers for white man's goods."

The pioneer merchant demanded angrily, "On whose authority, Stone, do you accuse me of murder and inciting to riot?"

"*You* consort with the Indians," Webster accused. "They've been seen

coming and going from this schoolhouse, at night."

For the first time, Stone appeared aware of his presence and asked him, "Is that a crime?" Then he turned back to Walsh. "Last night," he said soberly, "there was to have been held a council of war, between the chiefs of the Nisqualies, the Puyallups and the Snoqualmies. The brave who gave me the information was to have returned and reported their decision. But—"

"Your redskin friend didn't show up, eh?" Walsh cut in. He spoke to his partner. "Come. We're wasting our time listening to this windbag shout 'Wolf!' "

Stone followed them out. He said pleadingly, "For God's sake, Walsh, don't be an obstinate fool. There could be any number of reasons why the brave did not report back. Warn the people! Give them a fighting chance for their lives!"

Laughing derisively, Walsh flung back over a shoulder, "Wolf! Wolf!"

Twilight was now at hand. Smoke blossomed from cabin chimneys as housewives prepared the evening meal. There was little activity on the wharves, Walsh's barkentines being on the high seas.

These things Stone noted with desperate concern. Standing there, he thought of a number of things that he might do, before it was too late. He could make the rounds of the cabins, and the stores and saloons on Commercial Street, warning everybody. Yet he was doubtful if the warning would hold weight against the influence of Walsh and his hand-picked councilmen. And if the settlers did heed his warning, did repair to the safety of the stockade, and then the danger failed to materialize, he would become the laughing-stock of the territory.

Suddenly Stone heard the sound of approaching hoofbeats. Walsh and Webster came to a standstill as a white-faced rider burst from the fringe of timber. He heard the rider's excited shout as he flashed past the startled merchants and rode recklessly down the long slope to the wharves.

"Injuns! They've landed at Slatter's Point. To the stockade!"

They started running along the crest of the hogback toward Walsh's home. Stone rushed back to the lean-to, snatched up rifle, powder horn, and bullet pouch, then loading as he ran in the same direction, concerned for the safety of Mary Brice.

There arose a confusion of shouts, which swelled as gunshots echoed from Slatter's Point. Passing the first of the cabins, half hidden in the unlogged timber, Stone saw men, women, and children hurrying toward the De Gault stockade. He could hear the rattling of buckboards and wagons and the mad galloping of horses. Along Lafayette and Commercial Streets everything was in wild disorder, with men pouring from saloon and store, rushing out like ants from a disturbed hill.

A wagon broke from the timber, the team on a dead run. Mrs. Walsh and Mary Brice were holding tightly to the sides of the jolting box. Walsh's hired man sawed the team to a stop. Stone waved to Mary, and she waved back reassuringly as Walsh and Webster climbed over the endgate and sprawled on the wagon bed as the excited driver brought the whiplash down on the frantic animals' rumps.

Stone joined the straggling settlers, trying to still their fear, even while the shooting, from the western side of the settlement, drew rapidly nearer.

The scene at the De Gault stockade was one of near-panic. Settlers were crowding through the gate on foot, others were arriving by wagon, buckboard, and saddle horse. The men on guard fought both the crazed teams and their frantic drivers to prevent them from crashing through and running over those in their path. Bullets from the hogback crest kicked up spurts of dust in front of the stockade, several finding their mark in human flesh. Warning shouts went up from the gate guards as a harnessed horse, with broken shafts flailing, crazed by an arrow wound in the flank, came galloping toward the opening. Stone dropped it with a bullet from his long rifle.

He sized up the situation swiftly as the firing spread rapidly along the hogback. The Nisqualies had come in war canoes, keeping out of sight under the high bluffs, landing at Slatter's Point, where the Snoqualmies had joined them. The Puyallups had evidently ridden overland into the Chamber's Creek area. The three tribes had then met and spread out along the crest of the hogback, and now were cutting off all hope of escape to, or communication with, the distant fort.

Within the stockade, which had been constructed around the Reverend De Gault's cabin, men were shouting orders, children were screaming, women frantically hunting lost ones. There was desultory firing from the stockade by a mere handful of men. Above all could be heard the shrill war cries as the Indians drew nearer. Arrows and bullets were soon showering into the enclosure.

Walsh was trying to bring order out of chaos, directing that the women and children be taken into the house, together with the wounded. His long face was pale, and there was a stunned expression in his eyes. Beside him waddled the obese Webster, muttering incoherently, livid with fear.

A settler rushed up to Walsh, shook a fist in his face. "Damn you, you murderer! My wife—dead from an arrow—back there. Stone was right, but you—you wouldn't listen! You said—" He drew back his fist to strike, but Stone caught his arm and led him away, sobbing.

Ready hands grabbed the last settler and pulled him inside, then the stout stockade gate was slammed shut and the heavy oak bar dropped into position. Stone hurried into the De Gault house in search of Mary Brice, and found her in the crowded kitchen.

"Are you all right, Mary?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes, but I don't want to stay in here. I could be of more use outside. My father taught me how to load his rifle."

Stone lowered his voice that the others might not hear. "There isn't an extra rifle to reload, and not more than a dozen armed men to defend the stockade. The settlement has been caught flatfooted. The Indians are now between us and the stores, so there is no chance to add to our stock of powder and ball. Better remain here, with the women, Mary."

"But isn't there something you can

do, Alfred? You know these Indians. You might—"

"Let's face the facts, Mary—I was friendly with a few Nisqualies, but not one chief. When the friendly braves told me that their chief had invited the Puyallup and Snoqualmie tribes to a council, I was afraid this would happen. I tried to warn—"

He fell silent as Reverend De Gault entered. Mary, who had failed to note his entry, was still insistent.

"But help will surely come from the fort, Alfred. They'll hear the shooting."

"Of course, it will," Stone said, and left the house, followed by the preacher.

The latter asked anxiously, "Do you really believe that, Stone?"

Stone shook his head. "No, I don't. That long slope will act as a sounding board. The rifle reports are bouncing off it now and spreading out across the bay. Besides, there's a breeze, blowing from the direction of the fort, carrying the echoes away."

"Then our only hope is to send somebody through the Indian lines?"

Stone did not answer immediately. "Why ask me these questions?" he countered. "Walsh has led this settlement around by the beard. He got us into this mess—isn't it up to him to get us out?"

"God forgive me for a fool," the minister said. "Stone, I thought you were a troublemaker, a visionary. I'm sorry."

Ignoring that, Stone reverted to the original question. "Without doubt, our only hope is to get word to the fort."

Stone realized too, that whatever was to be done must be done quickly, for with the coming of darkness the Indians would rush the stockade. Evidently Walsh and several of his hand-picked councilmen had also realized the emergency. Riflemen were climbing on the stockade firing-step, spreading out along the high walls. The intervals between them were being filled by desperate men armed only with bowie knives, lengths of stove wood, even stones.

With a plan shaping itself in his mind, the schoolteacher hurried to the unguarded stockade fence overlooking the steep bluff leading down to the wharves. De Gault followed him, worried sick, an ear attuned to the unearthly war whoops, flinching at the crack of a rifle, gasping when an arrow plunked into the dirt at his feet.

Stone's plan was to scale the high fence when darkness fell, slide silently down the steep bluff, secure one of the many rowboats tied to the wharf, and row to Chamber's Creek. From that point, he would make his way through the dense brush, circling the Indian attackers and reaching the fort. To prevent his being branded as a deserter, since Walsh had practically accused him of being in collusion with the redskins, he outlined the plan to De Gault.

"That's taking terrible chances, Stone," the preacher said. "However, I know of no better man to tackle it. God go with you."

Stone mounted the firing-step and peered cautiously over the stockade. A long war canoe, packed with Nisqualies slipped silently around the wharf piling and touched the beach. The painted warriors carried the canoe above the high-tide mark, then scattered, cutting the painters and pushing the rowboats out to drift

away with the tide. They spotted Stone peering over the fence, and drove him off the firing-step with a flight of arrows.

Walsh caught sight of him approaching through the deepening twilight, and angrily demanded, "Why aren't you on the firing-step with the rest, Stone? There's no danger of attack from the bluff side. Don't you realize our desperate need for every rifle?"

Walsh was trying to hang on grimly to his waning authority even while the settlers, openly and profanely, were flouting it from all sides of the stockade—men who, only a short time ago, had stood in awe of it.

Stone retorted sharply, "Walsh, might I inquire why you neglected to provision this stockade with powder, ball, and rifles against this emergency?"

"I didn't believe—" Walsh began.

"That there might be such an emergency?" Stone cut in bitterly. "I've been trying to tell you that for—"

Reverend De Gault protested, "Gentlemen, this is hardly the time for quarreling. Walsh, Stone proposes going for help, by way of the bluff and Chamber's Creek. He's going to risk—"

"Too late now," Stone said. "We're entirely surrounded. The Nisqualies just landed on the beach. I'll join the men at the south fence."

Now occurred that brief interlude between twilight and total darkness. The yelling and indiscriminate shooting on both sides died away, and an ominous silence enveloped the stricken settlement. Stone's glance traveled to the tip of the hogback. Silhouetted against the skyline was the log school house and lean-to, blacked out a few moments later by the thick blanket of night.

The silence prevailed for a moment more, then was broken by a sudden rush of pattering feet beyond the stockade. The warning cry of "Injuns! Here they come!" was muted by a volley of rifle shots. Orange jets of fire pierced the darkness on both sides of the stockade fence. Soaring above the sounds of battle came the strident, piercing Indian war cry, *"Leschi!"* It rose to a blood-curdling, screaming crescendo. *"Leschi! Leschi! Leschi!"*

Walsh stood rooted to the spot on the firing-step, the first signs of fear appearing in his eyes. Down below on the ground behind Walsh, huddled against the firing-step, cowered the pot-bellied Webster, fingers plugging his ears to shut out the reiterated cry, which seemed now to set the very air vibrating.

Rifle balls thudded into the thick slab fence of the stout stockade, ripped slivers from their pointed tops, and flung them in the defenders' gaunt faces. Two men toppled from the firing-step, struck by bullet or arrow, and others leaped to take their rifles and places. Rifle butts smashed painted faces as they bobbed up above the fence stakes; lengths of stove wood thudded dully on feathered heads. Ramrods rang against rifle barrels as they were reloaded. Women screamed encouragement to their fighting men.

Naked figures topped the stockade fence and dropped lightly to the firing-step. Locked in a death grip, pioneer and redskin rolled on the ground, knives and tomahawks stabbing and flailing. A dozen hand-to-

hand fights were being waged on the hard-packed floor of the stockade in the baffling darkness. Arrows, tipped with blazing cedar bark, flew through the air like long-tailed comets, searching for inflammable targets, briefly illuminating little knots of struggling figures.

Alfred Stone emptied his rifle at a skulking figure, then felt it pulled from his grip and another handed up to him on the firing-step.

"It's loaded, Stone," came the excited voice of Reverend De Gault from the darkness. "Keep firing!"

The din of battle increased to a thunderous roar. Walsh's voice, sharp and commanding, was drowned out by a medley of screams, curses, and exploding firearms. Men shouted for assistance from wall to wall as the tide of battle surged their way; others shouted in vain for powder and ball when the last charge had been rammed home and fired.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the attack mysteriously ceased, the firing died away on both sides, and the patter of moccasined feet could be heard retreating into the protection of the surrounding timber.

Stone descended wearily from the firing-step and almost tripped over Webster's pudgy body. The schoolmaster's exploring fingers touched the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from the dead man's heart. Walsh's tall, thin form appeared out of the darkness. The beaver hat was missing, the immaculate broadcloth suit torn and soiled. Blood oozed from an ugly wound in his side. In his right hand he clutched a smoking derringer.

He yelled hoarsely, "Stay on the firing-step, men! Those red devils are rallying for another attack!"

Women poured out of the De Gault home, improvised torches waving, calling to their men, sinking to the ground with pitiful cries when the feeble light settled on pale features.

A stentorian voice bellowed from one side of the stockade, "Where's Webster?"

Another voice answered, "Dead. Where's that damned Walsh?"

"Mebbe hidin' in the house behind the women's skirts."

Back and forth the voices called, while Walsh, breathing deeply, stood and listened with haggard face, a stunned expression lingering in his bloodshot eyes.

A hand reached up and clutched at his pants leg. Walsh bent down, recognizing the pain-distorted face of one of his hand-picked councilmen in the light of a passing torch.

"You, Wallace!" he gritted and sank to one knee.

"Yeah, me," the man burbled through blood-flecked lips. "You hear me, damn you? I—I'm dyin'."

The man's hand touched Walsh's face. The kneeling man recoiled from the warm, sticky touch.

"That's my blood, Walsh," the dying councilman croaked. "It's—on your head. I'm cursin' you, just like they say Chief Leschi cursed you and Webster when you—when you hanged him to git him out'n the way. Me and him, we'll h'ant—" The voice ended in a gurgling choke.

Unaware of Stone's proximity, Walsh rose slowly to his feet and was starting away when Stone thrust out a detaining hand.

"What is it, Stone?"

Stone moistened his parched lips. He said, "Now's the time to go for

help before the Indians can organize for another attack."

"If you have a plan in mind, Stone, let's hear it in a hurry."

"The plan I have in mind, Walsh, was your suggestion."

Walsh noted the irony in Stone's voice, and his anger flared. "*My* suggestion?" he snarled. "You must be mad, Stone. I have no recollection—"

"There's no time to explain, now," Stone gritted. "Have the men fire a few rounds over the south fence, to divert the Indians' attention until I've had time to reach the timber."

Walsh hesitated for a moment. Then: "You propose to risk your life—going for help?"

"And why not? These are my people, my friends, and this is still my home."

"From the townsite limits to the fort is two miles—a long run, mostly through dense brush."

Stone smiled grimly. "Your suggestion did not include a two-mile run through the brush."

Walsh stared in bewilderment. "I still don't understand."

The schoolteacher handed over his rifle, bullet pouch, and powder horn. "You'll need these here. Give me that derringer."

A figure emerged from the blackness. Walsh commanded sharply, "Mary, go back to the house. You're in danger here."

She brushed past him and clutched at Stone. "Alfred, are you hurt? I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Walsh's eyebrows arched when Stone drew the girl into his embrace.

"No," Stone assured her. "I'm going for help, Mary," he said quietly.

"No, Alfred, you mustn't!" the girl cried out. A sob escaped her. Then, suddenly, resignedly—"All right, Alfred. But, somehow, it doesn't seem quite fair. I've been afraid that—that something like this would happen to mar our—come between us."

Stone bent and pressed his lips to hers. Walsh started away, flung back over a shoulder, "I'll instruct the men what to do, Stone."

Mary flung her arms around Stone's neck, clinging to him tightly. He gently disengaged her arms, and together they crossed to the west side of the stockade. Word had been flashed around, and the defenders crowded about him, slapped him on the back, wished him luck. Women clung to his arms, whispering prayers for his success. Walsh offered his hand. Stone hesitated, staring him squarely in the eye, then gripped it in silence.

Rifle fire rippled back and forth the length of the fence as many hands boosted Stone over. Dropping soundlessly on the other side, he was instantly swallowed up by the night. Mary Brice stood there with heart pounding, the whole world slipping away beneath her feet.

Walsh waited a moment more, trying to pierce the darkness into which Stone had disappeared. Then he spoke to the rifleman beside him. "Pass the word along to cease fire and prepare for the next attack."

With the guns silenced, the defenders could hear the Indian chiefs haranguing their braves, working them up into murderous fury. But the sound for which Mary Brice was listening—and hoping never to hear—was the dreaded death-cry that would announce Stone's capture and the end of hope for everybody.

"They're coming again!"

The warning was chorused from

three sides of the stockade. The onrush of pattering feet sounded like the stirring of fallen leaves by a stiff breeze. Ribbons of orange flamed into the night. Acrid gunpowder wafted across the stockade and out over the sound. On the beach below the steep bluff warriors from the long war canoes shot their arrows steeply into the air so that they fell within the stockade.

"Leschi! Leschi! Leschi!"

On came the horde, calling upon the spirit of their murdered chief, screaming for revenge. Leaping high in the air, their naked bodies revealed in the rifle flashes, they grasped the tops of the pointed slabs and hauled themselves up. The defenders, however, had learned much from that first attack. With scantling torn from the De Gault house and axed to a sharp point, men and women leaped to the assistance of the riflemen of the firing-step, thrusting desperately. Screams and the thud of falling bodies attested to the improvised weapons' effectiveness. The fury of the attack diminished.

A woman grabbed Mary Brice's arm and pointed toward the crest of the hogback with her sharpened, crimson-tipped scantling. "Look!" she cried. "What's that?"

A tiny point of light, like a lone star poised against the canopy of night, had suddenly appeared. It grew brighter and larger as the women watched, spreading out and changing to a dull red. Gradually the illumined outline of a window took unmistakable shape.

"It's a fire!" the woman by Mary shrilled.

Long tongues of flame licked hungrily upward; the shape of the building was revealed.

"The schoolhouse!" Mary cried. She ran to the firing-step and tugged at Walsh's trouser leg. "Alfred's set the schoolhouse afire! They'll see the flames from the fort! Oh, thank God!"

Walsh stared at the hogback through powder-smarting eyes. "Yes —now I see what he meant. That's what I threatened to do—to get rid of him—" Mary discerned the remorse and self-reproach in the tired voice.

Now the schoolhouse was a pyre of high-shooting flames. Smoke from the pitchy logs blossomed above them and hung there like a giant crimson mushroom. Soon there came the tangy odor of wood smoke; live embers trailed through the air like huge fireflies.

The attackers had hesitated as they glimpsed the blaze on the hogback, gazing in awe at the mounting pillar of fire. Chiefs and subchiefs exhorted them to a last charge which would carry the stockade, but the response was obviously not wholehearted.

On the other hand, the sight and meaning of the great signal fire had revived the spirits of the defenders; under its promise they carried on the fight, shouting encouragement to each other, defiance at the enemy. The rushes of the Indians became sporadic and desultory; the braves were losing their stomach for the fight. Still, the battle continued, as here and there a determined subchief rallied a knot of followers, until mounted figures appeared on the crest of the rise, silhouetted in the light of the burning building.

The riders circled it, then spurred

off at a tangent into the darkness. Seconds later, Mary caught the drumming of approaching hoofs, the distant shouts of men, and saw bursts of flame puncturing the darkness.

"The soldiers!" she screamed. The defenders took up the cry, its echoes muting the firing, carrying far out across the water, penetrating the timber.

The fighting ceased abruptly. Jabbering excitedly and pointing toward the burning schoolhouse, the Indians broke and fled into the protection of the timber. The galloping hoofs drew swiftly nearer as the cavalrymen fanned out across the face of the slope. Their carbines pushed back the immediate darkness, the bullets clipping fir fronds close to the heads of the fleeing redskins.

A bugle call rang out defiantly, and the defenders answered it with a thunderous cheer. Men rushed to the heavy stockade gate, lifted the oak bar, and flung it wide as Captain Houghton checked his sweating mount long enough to allow Alfred Stone to slip to the ground from behind the saddle.

"Get back in there, everybody!" the captain shouted. "Keep the gate closed till all danger is past!" Then he dug in his spurs and galloped away to catch up with his troop.

Stone was whisked inside, and the big gate closed with a bang. Instantly the schoolteacher became the center of a group of hysterical women and tired men. As gently as possible, he thrust their outstretched hands aside, calling for Mary. Then she was in his arms.

When at last they drew apart, Stone said to her quietly, "Let's go find Reverend De Gault, Mary."

OLD WEST MOVIES

A Western Quiz

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS movie-goers have had the chance to see plenty of films depicting life in the Old West. In the left-hand column below are listed the names of ten famous true-life characters of the frontier; in the right-hand column, the names of the movie stars who have played those characters on the screen. See how many you can match correctly, then check your answers with those on page 152. If your score is six right or over, you're doing plenty fine—and if you get 'em all correct, you've seen more movies than your editors have!

1. Kit Carson
2. "Calamity Jane"
3. Wyatt Earp
4. Buffalo Bill Cody
5. Wild Bill Hickok
6. Bat Masterson
7. Jesse James
8. Bob Ford
9. Billy the Kid
10. Sam Houston

___Jean Arthur
___Joel McCrea
___Robert Taylor
___Tyrone Power
___Randolph Scott
___Richard Dix
___Henry Fonda
___Bruce Cabot
___John Carradine
___Jon Hall

A Western Classic

By BRET HARTE

An Ingénue of the Sierras

THE ROLE *of Cupid is clearly a strange and unaccustomed one to be undertaken by Yuba Bill, the hard-bitten stagecoach driver. However, the plight of his attractive passenger, described by the eminent Judge Thompson as "quite a prairie flower, yet simple and guileless as a child," seems acute enough to warrant unprecedented measures. This, one of the lesser-known tales by the "granddaddy" of all Western-story writers, is certainly among his best.*

E ALL held our breath as the coach rushed through the semi-darkness of Galloper's Ridge. The vehicle itself was only a huge lumbering shadow; its side lights were carefully extinguished, and Yuba Bill had just politely removed from the lips of an outside passenger even the cigar with which he had been ostentatiously exhibiting his coolness. For it had been rumored that the Ramon Martinez gang of road agents were "laying" for us on the second grade, and would time the passage of our lights across Galloper's in order to intercept us in the brush beyond. If we could cross the ridge without being seen, and so get through the brush before they reached it, we were safe. If they followed, it would only be a stern chase with the odds in our favor.

The huge vehicle swayed from side to side, rolled, dipped, and plunged, but Bill kept the track, as if, in the whispered words of the expressman, he could "feel and smell" the road he could no longer see. We knew that at times we hung perilously over the edge of slopes that eventually dropped 1000 feet sheer to the tops of the sugar pines below, but we knew that Bill knew it also. The half visible heads of the horses, drawn wedgewise together by the tightened reins, appeared to cleave the darkness like a plowshare, held between his two rigid hands. Even the hoofbeats of the six

horses had fallen into a vague, monotonous, distant roll.

Then the ridge was crossed, and we plunged into the still blacker obscurity of the brush. Rather we no longer seemed to move—it was only the phantom night that rushed by us. The horses might have been submerged in some swift Lethean stream; nothing but the top of the coach and the rigid bulk of Yuba Bill arose above them. Yet even in that awful moment our speed was unslackened; it was as if Bill cared no longer to *guide* but only to drive, or as if the direction of his huge machine was determined by other hands than his. An incautious whisperer hazarded the paralyzing suggestion of our meeting another team. To our great astonishment Bill overheard it; to our greater astonishment he replied, "It 'ud be only a neck and neck race which would get to hell first," he said quietly. But we were relieved—for he had *spoken!* Almost simultaneously the wider turnpike began to glimmer faintly as a visible track before us; the wayside trees fell out of line, opened up, and dropped off one after another; we were on the broader tableland, out of danger, and apparently unperceived and unpursued.

Nevertheless in the conversation that broke out again with the relighting of the lamps, and the comments, congratulations, and reminiscences that were freely exchanged, Yuba Bill preserved a dissatisfied and even resentful silence. The most generous praise of his skill and courage awoke no response. "I reckon the old man wuz just spilin' for a fight, and is feelin' disappointed," said a passenger. But those who knew that Bill had the true fighter's scorn for any purely purposeless conflict were more or less concerned and watchful of him. He would drive steadily for four or five minutes with thoughtfully knitted brows, but eyes still keenly observant under his slouched hat, and then, relaxing his strained attitude, would give way to a movement of impatience.

"You ain't uneasy about anything, Bill, are you?" asked the expressman confidentially.

Bill lifted his eyes with a slightly contemptuous surprise. "Not about anything ter *come*. It's what *hez* happened that I don't exackly *sabe*. I don't see no signs of Ramon's gang ever havin' been out at all, and ef they were out I don't see why they didn't go for us."

"The simple fact is that our ruse was successful," said an outside passenger. "They waited to see our lights on the ridge, and, not seeing them, missed us until we had passed. That's my opinion."

"You ain't puttin' any price on that opinion, air ye?" inquired Bill politely.

"No."

"'Cos thar's a comic paper in 'Frisco pays for them things, an' I've seen worse things in it."

"Come off, Bill," retorted the passenger, slightly nettled by the tittering of his companions. "Then what did you put out the lights for?"

"Well," returned Bill grimly, "it mout have been because I didn't keer to hev you chaps blazin' away at the first bush you *thought* you saw move in your skeer, and bringin' down their fire on us."

The explanation, though unsatisfactory, was by no means an improbable one, and we thought it better to

accept it with a laugh. Bill, however, resumed his abstracted manner.

"Who got in at the Summit?" he at last asked abruptly of the expressman.

"Derrick and Simpson of Cold Spring, and one of the 'Excelsior' boys," responded the expressman.

"And that Pike County girl from Dow's Flat, with her bundles. Don't forget her," added the outside passenger ironically.

"Does anybody here know her?" continued Bill, ignoring the irony.

"You'd better ask Judge Thompson; he was mighty attentive to her; gettin' her a seat by the off window, and lookin' after her bundles and things."

"Gettin' her a seat by the *window?*" repeated Bill.

"Yes, she wanted to see everything, and wasn't afraid of the shooting."

"Yes," broke in a third passenger, "and he was so damned civil that when she dropped her ring in the straw, he struck a match agin all your rules, you know, and held it for her to find it. And it was just as we were crossin' through the brush, too. I saw the hull thing through the window, for I was hanging over the wheels with my gun ready for action. And it wasn't no fault of Judge Thompson's if his damned foolishness hadn't shown us up, and got us a shot from the gang."

Bill gave a short grunt, but drove steadily on without further comment or even turning his eyes to the speaker.

We were now not more than a mile from the station at the crossroads where we were to change horses. The lights already glimmered in the distance, and there was a faint suggestion of the coming dawn on the summits of the ridge to the west. We had plunged into a belt of timber, when suddenly a horseman emerged at a sharp canter from a trail that seemed to be parallel with our own. We were all slightly startled; Yuba Bill alone preserving his moody calm.

"Hullo!" he said.

The stranger wheeled to our side as Bill slackened his speed. He seemed to be a "packer" or freight muleteer.

"Ye didn't get held up on the Divide?" continued Bill cheerfully.

"No," returned the packer with a laugh; "*I* don't carry treasure. But I see you're all right, too. I saw you crossin' over Galloper's."

"*Saw* us?" said Bill sharply. "We had our lights out."

"Yes, but there was suthin' white—a handkerchief or woman's veil, I reckon—hangin' from the window. It was only a movin' spot agin the hillside, but ez I was lookin' out for ye I knew it was you by that. Good night!"

He cantered away. We tried to look at each other's faces, and at Bill's expression in the darkness, but he neither spoke nor stirred until he threw down the reins when he stopped before the station. The passengers quickly descended from the roof; the expressman was about to follow, but Bill plucked his sleeve.

"I'm goin' to take a look over this yer stage and those yer passengers with ye, afore we start."

"Why, what's up?"

"Well," said Bill, slowly disengaging himself from one of his enormous gloves, "when we waltzed down into the brush up there I saw a man, ez plain ez I see you, rise up from it. I thought our time had come and the band was goin' to play, when he sort-

er drew back, made a sign, and we just scooted past him."

"Well?"

"Well," said Bill, "it means that this yer coach was *passed through free* tonight."

"You don't object to *that*—surely? I think we were deucedly lucky."

Bill slowly drew off his other glove. "I've been riskin' my everlastin' life on this damned line three times a week," he said with mock humility, "and I'm allus thankful for small mercies— *But,*" he added grimly, "when it comes down to being passed free by some pal of a hoss thief, and thet called a speshal Providence, *I ain't in it!* No, sir, I ain't in it!"

It was with mixed emotions that the passengers heard that a delay of 15 minutes to tighten certain screw-bolts had been ordered by the autocratic Bill. Some were anxious to get their breakfast at Sugar Pine, but others were not averse to linger for the daylight that promised greater safety on the road. The expressman, knowing the real cause of Bill's delay, was nevertheless at a loss to understand the object of it. The passengers were all well known; any idea of complicity with the road agents was wild and impossible, and, even if there was a confederate of the gang among them, he would have been more likely to precipitate a robbery than to check it. Again, the discovery of such a confederate—to whom they clearly owed their safety—and his arrest would have been quite against the California sense of justice, if not actually illegal. It seemed evident that Bill's quixotic sense of honor was leading him astray.

The station consisted of a stable, a wagon shed, and a building containing three rooms. The first was fitted up with "bunks" or sleeping berths for the employees; the second was the kitchen; and the third and larger apartment was dining-room or sitting-room, and was used as general waiting-room for the passengers. It was not a refreshment station, and there was no bar. But a mysterious command from the omnipotent Bill produced a demijohn of whisky, with which he hospitably treated the company.

The seductive influence of the liquor loosened the tongue of the gallant Judge Thompson. He admitted to having struck a match to enable the fair Pike Countian to find her ring, which, however, proved to have fallen in her lap. She was "a fine, healthy young woman—a type of the Far West, sir; in fact, quite a prairie blossom! yet simple and guileless as a child." She was on her way to Marysville, he believed, "although she expected to meet friends—a friend, in fact—later on." It was her first visit to a large town—in fact, any civilized center—since she crossed the plains three years ago. Her girlish curiosity was quite touching, and her innocence irresistible. In fact, in a country whose tendency was to produce "frivolity and forwardness in young girls," he found her a most interesting young person. She was even then out in the stableyard watching the horses being harnessed, "preferring to indulge a pardonable, healthy young curiosity than to listen to the empty compliments of the younger passengers."

The figure which Bill saw thus engaged, without being otherwise distinguished, certainly seemed to justify the judge's opinion. She appeared

to be a well-matured country girl, whose frank gray eyes and large laughing mouth expressed a wholesome and abiding gratification in her life and surroundings. She was watching the replacing of luggage in the boot. A little feminine start, as one of her own parcels was thrown somewhat roughly on the roof, gave Bill his opportunity.

"Now there," he growled to the helper, "ye ain't carting stone! Look out, will yer! Some of your things, Miss?" he added, with gruff courtesy, turning to her. "These yer trunks, for instance?"

She smiled a pleasant assent, and Bill, pushing aside the helper, seized a large square trunk in his arms. But from excess of zeal, or some other mischance, his foot slipped, and he came down heavily, striking the corner of the trunk on the ground and loosening its hinges and fastenings. It was a cheap, common-looking affair, but the accident discovered in its yawning lid a quantity of white, lace-edged feminine apparel of an apparently superior quality.

The young lady uttered another cry and came quickly forward, but Bill was profuse in his apologies, himself girded the broken box with a strap, and declared his intention of having the company "make it good" to her with a new one. Then he casually accompanied her to the door of the waiting-room, entered, made a place for her before the fire by simply lifting the nearest and most youthful passenger by the coat collar from the stool that he was occupying, and, having installed the lady in it, displaced another man, who was standing before the chimney, and, drawing himself up to his full six feet of height in front of her, glanced down upon his fair passenger as he took his waybill from his pocket.

"Your name is down here as Miss Mullins?" he said.

She looked up, became suddenly aware that she and her questioner were the center of interest to the whole circle of passengers, and with a slight rise of color, returned, "Yes."

"Well, Miss Mullins, I've got a question or two to ask ye. I ask it straight out afore this crowd. It's in my rights to take ye aside and ask it—but that ain't my style; I'm no detective. I needn't ask it at all, but act as ef I knowed the answer, or I might leave it to be asked by others. Ye needn't answer it ef ye don't like; ye've got a friend over ther—Judge Thompson—who is a friend to ye, right or wrong, jest as any other man here is—as though ye'd packed your own jury. Well, the simple question I've got to ask ye is *this*: Did you signal to anybody from the coach when we passed Galloper's an hour ago?"

We all thought that Bill's courage and audacity had reached its climax here. To openly and publicly accuse a lady before a group of chivalrous Californians, and that lady possessing the further attractions of youth, good looks, and innocence, was little short of desperation. There was an evident movement of adhesion toward the fair stranger, a slight muttering broke out on the right, but the very boldness of the act held them in stupefied surprise. Judge Thompson, with a bland, propitiatory smile began: "Really, Bill, I must protest on behalf of this young lady"—when the fair accused, raising her eyes to her accuser, to the consternation of everybody answered with the slight but

convincing hesitation of conscientious truthfulness:

"*I did.*"

"Ahem!" interposed the judge hastily, "er—that is—er—you allowed your handkerchief to flutter from the window—I noticed it myself—casually—one might say even playfully—but without any particular significance."

The girl, regarding her apologist with a singular mingling of pride and impatience, returned briefly: "I signaled."

"Who did you signal to?" asked Bill gravely.

"The young gentleman I'm going to marry."

A start, followed by a slight titter from the younger passengers, was instantly suppressed by a savage glance from Bill.

"What did you signal to him for?" he continued.

"To tell him I was here, and that it was all right," returned the young girl, with a steadily rising pride and color.

"Wot was all right?" demanded Bill.

"That I wasn't followed, and that he could meet me on the road beyond Cass's Ridge Station." She hesitated a moment, and then, with a still greater pride, in which a youthful defiance was still mingled, said, "I've run away from home to marry him. And I mean to! No one can stop me. Dad didn't like him just because he was poor, and Dad's got money. Dad wanted me to marry a man I hate, and got a lot of dresses and things to bribe me."

"And you're taking them in your trunk to the other feller?" said Bill grimly.

"Yes, he's poor," returned the girl defiantly.

"Then your father's name is Mullins?" asked Bill.

"It's not Mullins. I—I—took that name," she hesitated, with her first exhibition of self-consciousness.

"Wot *is* his name?"

"Eli Hemmings."

A smile of relief and significance went round the circle. The fame of Eli or "Skinner" Hemmings, as a notorious miser and usurer, had passed even beyond Galloper's Ridge.

"The step that you're taking, Miss Mullins, I need not tell you, is one of great gravity," said Judge Thompson, with a certain paternal seriousness of manner, in which, however, we were glad to detect a glaring affectation; "and I trust that you and your affianced have fully weighed it. Far be it from me to interfere with or question the natural affections of two young people, but may I ask you what you know of the—er—young gentleman for whom you are sacrificing so much, and, perhaps, imperiling your whole future? For instance, have you known him long?"

The slightly troubled air of trying to understand—not unlike the vague wonderment of childhood — with which Miss Mullins had received the beginning of this exordium, changed to a relieved smile of comprehension as she said quickly, "Oh yes, nearly a whole year."

"And," said the judge, smiling, "has he a vocation—is he in business?"

"Oh, yes," she returned, "he's a collector."

"A collector?"

"Yes; he collects bills, you know—money," she went on, with childish eagerness, "not for himself—*he* never

has any money, poor Charley—but for his firm. It's dreadful hard work, too; keeps him out for days and nights, over bad roads and baddest weather. Sometimes, when he's stole over to the ranch to see me, he's been so bad he could scarcely keep his seat in the saddle, much less stand. And he's got to take mighty big risks, too. Times the folks are cross with him and won't pay; once they shot him in the arm, and he came to me, and I helped do it up for him. But he don't mind. He's real brave—jest as brave as he's good." There was such a wholesome ring of truth in this pretty praise that we were touched in sympathy with the speaker.

"What firm does he collect for?" asked the judge gently.

"I don't know exactly—he won't tell me; but I think it's a Spanish firm. You see"—she took us all into her confidence with a sweeping smile of innocent yet half-mischievous artfulness—"I only know because I peeped over a letter he once got from his firm, telling him he must hustle up and be ready for the road the next day; but I think the name was Martinez—yes, Ramon Martinez."

In the dead silence that ensued—a silence so profound that we could hear the horses in the distant stable-yard rattling their harness—one of the younger "Excelsior" boys burst into a hysteric laugh, but the fierce eye of Yuba Bill was down upon him, and seemed to instantly stiffen him into a silent, grinning mask. The young girl, however, took no note of it. Following out, with lover-like diffusiveness, the reminiscences thus awakened, she went on:

"Yes, it's mighty hard work, but he says it's all for me, and as soon as we're married he'll quit it. He might have quit before, but won't take no money of me, nor what I told him I could get out of Dad! That ain't his style. He's mighty proud—if he is poor—is Charley. Why thar's all Ma's money which she left me in the Savin's Bank that I wanted to draw out—for I had the right—and give it to him, but he wouldn't hear of it! Why, he wouldn't take one of the things I've got with me, if he knew it.

"And so he goes on ridin' and ridin', here and there and everywhere, and gettin' more and more played out and sad, and thin and pale as a spirit, and always so uneasy about his business; and startin' up at times when we're meetin' out in the South Woods or in the far clearin', and sayin', 'I must be goin' now, Polly,' and yet always tryin' to be chiffle and chipper afore me. Why he must have rid miles and miles to have watched for me thar in the brush at the foot of Galloper's tonight, jest to see if all was safe; and Lordy! I'd have given him the signal and showed a light if I'd died for it the next minit. There! That's what I know of Charley—that's what I'm running away from home for—that's what I'm running to him for, and I don't care who knows it! And I only wish I'd done it afore—and I would—if—if—if—he'd only *asked me!* There now!"

She stopped, panted, and choked. Then one of the sudden transitions of youthful emotion overtook the eager, laughing face; it clouded up with the swift change of childhood, a lightning quiver of expression broke over it, and—then came the rain!

I think this simple act completed our utter demoralization! We smiled feebly at each other with that as-

sumption of masculine superiority which is miserably conscious of its own helplessness at such moments. We looked out of the window, blew our noses, said: "Eh—what?" and "I say," vaguely to each other, and were greatly relieved, and yet apparently astonished, when Yuba Bill, who had turned his back upon the fair speaker, and was kicking the logs in the fireplace, suddenly swept down upon us and bundled us all into the road, leaving Miss Mullins alone. Then he walked aside with Judge Thompson for a few moments, returned to us, autocratically demanded of the party a complete reticence toward Miss Mullins on the subject matter under discussion, re-entered the station, reappeared with the young lady, suppressed a faint idiotic cheer which broke from us at the spectacle of her innocent face once more cleared and rosy, climbed the box, and in another moment we were under way.

"Then she don't know what her lover is yet?" asked the expressman eagerly.

"No."

"Are *you* certain it's one of the gang?"

"Can't say *for sure*. It mout be a young chap from Yolo who bucked agin the tiger at Sacramento, got regularly cleaned out and busted, and joined the gang for a flier. They say thar was a new hand in that job at Keeley's—and a mighty game one, too; and ez there was some buckshot onloaded that trip, he might hev got his share, and that would tally with what the girl said about his arm. See! Ef that's the man, I've heered he was the son of some big preacher in the States and a college sharp to boot, who ran wild in 'Frisco, and played himself for all he was worth. They're the wust kind to kick when they once get a foot over the traces. For stiddy, comf'ble kempany," added Bill reflectively, "give *me* the son of a man that was *hanged*!"

"But what are you going to do about this?"

"That depends upon the feller who comes to meet her."

"But you ain't going to try to take him? That would be playing it pretty lowdown on them both."

"Keep your hair on, Jimmy! The judge and me are only going to rastle with the sperrit of that gay young galoot, when he drops down for his girl—and exhort him pow'ful! Ef he allows he's convicted of sin and will find the Lord, we'll marry him and the gal offhand at the next station, and the judge will officiate himself for nothin'. We're goin' to have this yer elopement done on the square—and our waybill clean—you bet!"

"But you don't suppose he'll trust himself in your hands?"

"Polly will signal to him that it's all square."

"Ah!" said the expressman. Nevertheless, in those few moments the men seemed to have exchanged dispositions. The expressman looked doubtfully, critically, and even cynically before him. Bill's face had relaxed, and something like a bland smile beamed across it, as he drove confidently and unhesitatingly forward.

Day, meantime, although full-blown and radiant on the mountain summits around us, was yet nebulous and uncertain in the valleys into which we were plunging. Lights still glimmered in the cabins and the few

ranch buildings which began to indicate the thicker settlements. And the shadows were heaviest in a little copse, where a note from Judge Thompson in the coach was handed up to Yuba Bill, who at once slowly began to draw up his horses.

The coach stopped finally near the junction of a small crossroad. At the same moment Miss Mullins slipped down from the vehicle, and, with a parting wave of her hand to the judge, who had assisted her from the steps, tripped down the crossroad, and disappeared in its semi-obscurity. To our surprise the stage waited, Bill holding the reins listlessly in his hands. Five minutes passed—an eternity of expectation, and, as there was that in Yuba Bill's face which forbade idle questioning, an aching void of silence also. This was at last broken by a strange voice from the road:

"Go on—we'll follow."

The coach started forward. Presently we heard the sound of other wheels behind us. We all craned our necks backward to get a view of the unknown, but by the growing light we could only see that we were followed at a distance by a buggy with two figures in it. Evidently Polly Mullins and her lover! We hoped that they would pass us. But the vehicle, although drawn by a fast horse, preserved its distance always, and it was plain that its driver had no desire to satisfy our curiosity. The expressman had recourse to Bill.

"Is it the man you thought of?" he asked eagerly.

"I reckon," said Bill briefly.

"But," continued the expressman, returning to his former skepticism, "what's to keep them both from levanting together now?"

Bill jerked his hand toward the boot with a grim smile. "Their baggage."

"Oh!" said the expressman.

"Yes," continued Bill. "We'll hang on to that gal's little frills and fixin's until this yer job's se'ttled, and the ceremony's over, jest as ef we wuz her own father. And, what's more, young man," he added, suddenly turning to the expressman, "*you'll* express them trunks of hers *through to Sacramento* with your kempany's labels, and hand her the receipts and checks for them, so she *can get 'em there*. That'll keep *him* outer temptation and the reach o' the gang, until they get away among white men and civilization again. When your hoary-headed ole grandfather, or, to speak plainer, that partikler old whisky-soaker known as Yuba Bill, wot sits on this box," he continued, with a diabolical wink at the expressman, "waltzes in to pervide for a young couple jest startin' in life, thar's nothin' mean about his style, you bet. He fills the bill every time! Speshal Providences take a back seat when he's around."

When the station hotel and straggling settlement of Sugar Pine, now distinct and clear in the growing light, at last rose within rifleshot on the plateau, the buggy suddenly darted swiftly by us, so swiftly that the faces of the two occupants were barely distinguishable as they passed, and keeping the lead by a dozen lengths, reached the door of the hotel. The young girl and her companion leaped down and vanished within as we drew up. They had evidently determined to elude our curiosity, and were successful.

But the material appetites of the

passengers, sharpened by the keen mountain air, were more potent than their curiosity, and, as the breakfast bell rang out at the moment the stage stopped, a majority of them rushed into the dining-room and scrambled for places without giving much heed to the vanished couple or to the judge and Yuba Bill, who had disappeared also. The through coach to Marysville and Sacramento was likewise waiting, for Sugar Pine was the limit of Bill's ministration, and the coach which we had just left went no farther. In the course of 20 minutes, however, there was a slight and somewhat ceremonious bustling in the hall and on the veranda, and Yuba Bill and the judge re-appeared. The latter was leading, with some elaboration of manner and detail, the shapely figure of Miss Mullins, and Yuba Bill was accompanying her companion to the buggy.

We all rushed to the windows to get a good view of the mysterious stranger and probable ex-brigand whose life was now linked with our fair fellow passenger. I am afraid, however, that we all participated in a certain impression of disappointment and doubt. Handsome and even cultivated-looking, he assuredly was —young and vigorous in appearance. But there was a certain half-shamed, half-defiant suggestion in his expression, yet coupled with a watchful lurking uneasiness which was not pleasant and hardly becoming a bridegroom—and the possessor of such a bride. But the frank, joyous, innocent face of Polly Mullins, resplendent with a simple, happy confidence, melted our hearts again, and condoned the fellow's shortcomings. We waved our hands; I think we would have given three rousing cheers as they drove away if the omnipotent eye of Yuba Bill had not been upon us. It was well, for the next moment we were summoned to the presence of that soft-hearted autocrat.

We found him alone with the judge in a private sitting-room, standing before a table on which there was a decanter and glasses. As we filed expectantly into the room and the door closed behind us, he cast a glance of hesitating tolerance over the group.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "you was all present at the beginnin' of a little game this mornin', and the Judge thar thinks that you oughter be let in at the finish. *I* don't see that it's any of *your* damned business—so to speak; but ez the judge here allows you're all in the secret, I've called you in to take a partin' drink to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Charley Byng —ez is now comf'ably off on their bridal tower. What *you* know or what *you* suspects of the young galoot that's married the gal ain't worth shucks to anybody, and I wouldn't give it to a yaller pup to play with, but the judge thinks you ought all to promise right here that you'll keep it dark. That's his opinion. Ez far as my opinion goes, gen'l'men," continued Bill with greater blandness and apparent cordiality, "I wanter simply remark, in a keerless, offhand gin'ral way, that ef I ketch any Godforsaken, lop-eared, chuckle-headed blatherin' idjet airin' *his* opinion—"

"One moment, Bill," interposed Judge Thompson with a grave smile; "let me explain. You understand, gentlemen," he said, turning to us, "the singular, and I may say affecting, situation which our good-hearted

friend here has done so much to bring to what we hope will be a happy termination. I want to give here, as my professional opinion, that there is nothing in his request which, in your capacity as good citizens and law-abiding men, you may not grant.

"I want to tell you, also, that you are condoning no offense against the statutes; that there is not a particle of legal evidence before us of the criminal antecedents of Mr. Charles Byng, except that which has been told you by the innocent lips of his betrothed, which the law of the land has now sealed forever in the mouth of his wife, and that our own actual experience of his acts has been in the main exculpatory of any previous irregularity—if not incompatible with it. Briefly, no judge would charge, no jury convict, on such evidence. When I add that the young girl is of legal age, that there is no evidence of any previous undue influence, but rather of the reverse, on the part of the bridegroom, and that I was content, as a magistrate, to perform the ceremony, I think you will be satisfied to give your promise, for the sake of the bride, and drink a happy life to them both."

I need not say that we did this cheerfully, and even extorted from Bill a grunt of satisfaction. The majority of the company, however, who were going with the through coach to Sacramento, then took their leave, and, as we accompanied them to the veranda, we could see that Miss Polly Mullins's trunks were already transferred to the other vehicle under the protecting seals and labels of the all-potent express company. Then the whip cracked, the coach rolled away, and the last traces of the adventurous young couple disappeared in the hanging red dust of its wheels.

But Yuba Bill's grim satisfaction at the happy issue of the episode seemed to suffer no abatement. He even exceeded his usual deliberately regulated potations, and, standing comfortably with his back to the center of the now deserted barroom, was more than usually loquacious with the expressman.

"You see," he said, in bland reminiscence, "when your old Uncle Bill takes hold of a job like this, he puts it straight through without changin' hosses. Yet thar was a moment, young feller, when I thought I was stompt! It was when we'd made up our mind to make that chap tell the gal fust all what he was! Ef she'd rared or kicked in the traces, or hung back only ez much ez that, we'd hev given him jest five minits' law to get up and get and leave her, and we'd hev toted that gal and her fixin's back to her dad again! But she jest gave a little scream and start, and then went off inter hysterics, right on his buzzum, laughin' and cryin' and sayin' that nothin' should part 'em. Gosh! if I didn't think *he* wuz more cut up than she about it; a minit it looked as ef *he* didn't allow to marry her arter all, but that passed, and they was married hard and fast—you bet! I reckon he's had enough of stayin' out o' nights to last him, and ef the valley settlements hevn't got hold of a very shining member, at least the foothills hev got shut of one more of the Ramon Martinez gang."

"What's that about the Ramon Martinez gang?" said a quiet potential voice.

Bill turned quickly. It was the voice of the divisional superintendent

of the express company—a man of eccentric determination of character, and one of the few whom the autocratic Bill recognized as an equal—who had just entered the barroom. His dusty pongee cloak and soft hat indicated that he had that morning arrived on a round of inspection.

"Don't care if I do, Bill," he continued, in response to Bill's invitatory gesture, walking to the bar. "It's a little raw out on the road. Well, what were you saying about the Ramon Martinez gang? You haven't come across one of 'em, have you?"

"No," said Bill, with a slight blinking of his eye as he ostentatiously lifted his glass to the light.

"And you *won't*," added the superintendent, leisurely sipping his liquor. "For the fact is, the gang is about played out. Not from want of a job now and then, but from the difficulty of disposing of the results of their work. Since the new instructions to the agents to identify and trace all dust and bullion offered to them went into force, you see, they can't get rid of their swag. All the gang are spotted at the offices, and it costs too much for them to pay a fence or a middleman of any standing. Why, all that flaky river gold they took from the Excelsior Company can be identified as easy as if it were stamped with the company's mark. They can't melt it down themselves; they can't get others to do it for them; they can't ship it to the Mint or Assay Offices in Marysville and 'Frisco, for they won't take it without our certificate and seals; and *we* don't take any undeclared freight *within* the lines that we've drawn around their beat, except from people and agents known. Why, *you* know that well enough, Jim," he said, suddenly appealing to the expressman, "don't you?"

Possibly the suddenness of the appeal caused the expressman to swallow his liquor the wrong way, for he was overtaken with a fit of coughing, and stammered hastily as he laid down his glass, "Yes—of course—certainly."

"No, sir," resumed the superintendent cheerfully, "they're pretty well played out. And the best proof of it is that they've lately been robbing ordinary passengers' trunks. There was a freight wagon 'held up' near Dow's Flat the other day, and a lot of baggage gone through. I had to go down there to look into it. Darned if they hadn't lifted a lot o' woman's wedding things from that rich couple who got married the other day out at Marysville. Looks as if they were playing it rather lowdown, don't it? Coming down to hardpan and bedrock—eh?"

The expressman's face was turned anxiously toward Bill, who, after a hurried gulp of his remaining liquor, still stood staring at the window. Then he slowly drew on one of his large gloves. "Ye didn't," he said, with a slow, drawling, but perfectly distinct, articulation, "happen to know old 'Skinner' Hemmings when you were over there?"

"Yes."

"And his daughter?"

"He hasn't got any."

"A sort o' mild, innocent, guileless child of nature?" persisted Bill, with a yellow face, a deadly calm, and Satanic deliberation.

"No. I tell you he *hasn't* any daughter. Old Man Hemmings is a confirmed old bachelor. He's too mean to

support more than one."

"And you didn't happen to know any o' that gang, did ye?" continued Bill, with infinite protraction.

"Yes. Knew 'em all. There was French Pete, Cherokee Bob, Kanaka Joe, One-eyed Stillson, Softy Brown, Spanish Jack, and two or three greasers."

"And ye didn't know a man by the name of Charley Byng?"

"No," returned the superintendent with a slight suggestion of weariness and a distraught glance toward the door.

"A dark, stylish chap, with shifty black eyes and a curled-up mer-stache?" continued Bill with dry, colorless persistence.

"No. Look here, Bill, I'm in a little bit of a hurry—but I suppose you must have your little joke before we part. Now, what *is* your little game?"

"Wot you mean?" demanded Bill with sudden brusqueness.

"Mean? Well, old man, you know as well as I do. You're giving me the very description of Ramon Martinez himself, ha! ha! No—Bill! you didn't play me this time. You're mighty spry and clever, but you didn't catch on just then." He nodded and moved away with a light laugh.

Bill turned a stony face to the expressman. Suddenly a gleam of mirth came into his gloomy eyes. He bent over the young man, and said in a hoarse, chuckling whisper, "But I got even after all!"

"How?"

"He's tied up to that lying little she-devil, hard and fast!"

"Oh, by the way, Slim, here's that ten-spot I owe yuh!"

—Carl Hammond

TALL HAT TRADERS

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

AS the closing months of 1874 slid through the hour glass of history and the people of the High Plains sought shelter for the winter in the canyons, a strange scene took place somewhat east of the present-day city of Amarillo. A grizzled army officer, Colonel Ranald McKenzie, hung a New Mexican trader from the tongue of his own lead wagon until he talked. What he said led McKenzie to the winter hide-outs of the Comanche. What he said brought to an end a trade that had existed for 150 years and more. What he said, and its results, led Quanah Parker to swear that he "would broil Tafolla alive" if he ever caught him. Jose Pieda Tafolla was the last of *los Comancheros*, and he died with his boots off and not over a slow fire—a fact that still occasions some regrets.

Theft is nothing difficult, not even immoral, if it be practiced on the grand scale, or so our history—our legend—seems to prove. Converting the proceeds of that theft into hard cash, *E Pluribus Spendum*, is something else again. The proceeds of theft in the cities of the world—paintings, precious gems, stocks and bonds and postage stamps—found and still finds, a hard cash value from a breed

THE COMANCHE, *pushed southward by the warlike Sioux, finally settle in the High Plains of the Southwest, where they turn with uninhibited delight to a career of theft, rapine, and murder. They need "fences" to dispose of their plunder—a need soon filled by* los Comancheros, *the "tall hat traders," a border breed whose highly rewarding occupation flourishes until an army officer, by use of a crude but effective process of persuasion, makes one of the renegades' leaders talk. This colorful chapter of Southwest frontier history is a ZGWM original.*

known to our language as "fences"—Mother Mandelbaum, for classical example. The "fences" make city thievery profitable.

The proceeds of theft on the High Plains—mules, horses, and cattle by the hundreds of thousands, men, women and children by the hundreds—found a hard cash value for over 150 years from *los Comancheros,* the New Mexican traders out of Santa Fé, that city of the Holy Faith. From the days when Villasur and his leather-jackets found death along the Canadian down to the days of Billy the Kid, they trafficked in the fragments of human suffering—indeed, in the humans themselves—that were the purchase price of the High Plains, the cockpit of America.

In the beginning, *los Comancheros* plodded over the High Plains on foot beside their equally plodding burros, singly or in groups of two or three. At the end, they rode forth in great companies, gaily dressed, well-armed, superbly mounted. A whole host of high-wheeled carts, *carretas,* squealed on dry axles under the burden of their trade goods. No matter what their style, no matter what color their skins, they were *los Comancheros* for two good reasons.

One reason, of course, was profits; the other and principal reason was what made those profits possible—the Comanche. The Slave-Traders of the Plains, the Scourge of Mexico, the Arabs of America, warriors and incomparable horsemen, the Comanche were the last and greatest barrier to settlement of the High Plains country. They were as cruel as the Apache they hated, as treacherous as the Kiowa they dominated—and better thieves than both. Even without them, the history of the Plains would have been written in the letters of epic human toil against implacable elements; with them, it was written in letters of blood that time has not yet erased. Their heartland, *Comancheria,* stretched from the Arkansas River on the north to San Antonio de Bexar on the south; from the Cross Timbers on the east to the Rocky Mountains in New Mexico on the west. Like the Russians', their land fought for them as they traded space to the white man for a few more years of the wild free life that was theirs by right of conquest and survival.

The Comanche, a tribe of the widely distributed Shoshonean stock, came late to the buffalo lands and, like the new newsboy on the choice corner, they stayed there the hard way. When the 18th century was just beginning, the Shoshone nation pushed east from their mountain fastnesses in Wyoming and Idaho. Maybe hunger forced them out, perhaps it was an insane desire to better their condition in life; whatever the reason, they knew the answer: the

Great Plains where teemed the buffalo—the buffalo that meant the Indian's "ever normal granary" some years before Henry Wallace made the phrase popular. Moving their goods and chattels on dog-drawn *travois*—they as yet had no horses—the Shoshone debouched onto the Northern Plains. They found the buffalo and, in time, they found the horse. First and foremost, they found the Sioux!

The Sioux were being pushed out of their Minnesota forests by the Chippewa, who had guns from the French and English farther east, and the fight for the northern buffalo lands—a fight that ended 175 years later in the Valley of The Little Big Horn—was first joined. The impact was terrific, and the results reached far into our history. The Shoshone, a short, full-bodied mountain tribe, were no match for the tall, lithe, Roman-nosed Sioux. They were forced back into their mountains, all save one branch of their nation who turned south. Southward they went, fighting all the way, determined to stay in the land of Plenty Meat—the land of buffalo and horses, a combination that was the Comanche equivalent of two chickens in every pot.

No one knows the full story of the Comanches' furious struggle to the south but, by 1720, they were firmly settled in *Comancheria*. The Apache and Navajo had been pushed into New Mexico and Arizona where they live today; the Kiowas, Cheyennes, Pawnees, and Arapahoes were disposed to let this scorpion breed alone if possible, and the Lipans, an Apache offshoot, had been pushed still farther south to be ground against the Spanish advance from Mexico. The River Tribes, Sauk and Fox, Missouri, Osage, Kaw, and Caddo, stayed in or east of the Cross Timbers, and the Comanche turned toward a life of theft, rapine, and murder with a whole-souled and uninhibited delight. Make no mistake! The Comanche were ever the bandit breed—they would have been right at home in those looting, lecherous legions of men-at-arms, the Free Companions who ravished Europe when chivalry was in flower on that continent.

From the beginnings of the European struggle for our continent, the very location of their homeland made their way of life easy, as well as pleasant and profitable. The Comanche lay between the French, advancing westward from New Orleans and the Mississippi, and the Spanish, advancing north and east from Chihuahua and Santa Fé. The Comanche were in the middle—and how they loved it! The Spanish paid them to spy on the French; the French paid them to harass the Spanish; the Comanche took pay from both—and plundered both with a fine degree of impartiality.

They traded buffalo robes to the Spanish for horses, three hides for one horse, then traded the horses to the French for guns and ammunition with which to kill more buffalo to trade to the Spanish for more horses—it was most satisfactory to the Comanche. Thus the pattern of governmental bargaining for Comanche plunder was established. The pattern existed, officially or unofficially, until the trade was ended. The Comanche were wooed in turn, often simultaneously, by the governments of Spain, France, England, Texas, Mexico, and

the fledgling United States; they were a vital part in Sam Houston's unrealized dream of conquering Mexico. The Comanche took pay and plunder from them all and when the governments would no longer "fence" their loot, *los Comancheros* took up the profitable trade.

For some years, the trade with *los Barbaros*, the Comanche, was centralized at Taos, New Mexico. A great fair was held in July and August of each year and here the Comanche brought the proceeds of their raids, the livestock and the slaves, to trade for cloth and iron and the cone-shaped sugar loaves called *piloncillo*. It was always pleasant to think that the loot they traded came from the foreign settlements, French or English, along the Mississippi. That a majority of it came from their fellows in Old Mexico bothered none of the New Mexicans concerned. Trade has ever been trade, with its own morals and customs.

The government of New Mexico sponsored this fair for a share of the proceeds, perhaps unofficially distributed among members of that government, before the business was eventually driven underground. A tax-hungry officialdom decreed that all merchandise imported into New Mexico from or by foreigners must pay a heavy duty. Despite the howls of the traders, this decree applied to the *contrabando* of the Comanches. So the annual fair at Taos was abandoned and, instead, the wily traders forged out onto the High Plains to meet the Comanche away from prying official eyes, do their trading and bring back the proceeds, largely horses and mules, to New Mexico to be sold as home-grown products. Every four-legged animal in New Mexico showed an astonishing increase in birth rate.

When Moses Austin led the first 300 families to colonize his grant in the Mexican territory of Tejas, he started *los Comancheros* on the high road to big business. The white settlements pushing west brought the source of supply closer to *Comancheria*. The Comanche were not slow to grasp the significance of the big volume and quick turnover that this tide of emigration made possible. Too, the Santa Fé Trail became an artery of commerce—the legal commerce of the prairies—about this time, and the Comanche did not even have to seek his plunder. It came rolling to meet him in the boat-shaped bodies of the Conestoga wagons. A regular schedule of raids was worked out to provide a guaranteed annual employment. In the spring they raided the Texas settlements; in the summer they preyed on the Santa Fé Trail, and in September they forayed far south into Old Mexico, their stand-by for loot. In winter they added up the balance sheet for the year. Some tribes fought for glory, some for survival, but the Comanche fought always for profit.

Throughout the trading-season thus established, *los Comancheros* left their bases of supply, Toas, Mora, and Las Vegas in New Mexico, and headed for their rendezvous on the High Plains. These rendezvous bore picturesque names—Las Tecovas (The Buffalo Hide Sack), Canyon del Recaté (The Canyon of Ransom), Rio de las Lenguas (River of Tongues)—from the nationalities gathered there to trade, and Valle de las Lagrimas (Valley of Tears), where captive fam-

ilies were divided amongst the bands to lessen their chances of escape. The Santa Fé Trail provided the articles of American industry so highly prized when smuggled into New Mexico duty free. Mexico provided horses and mules and slaves (Indian); the Texas settlements provided horses and mules and slaves (Negro) and white captives for ransom.

The Comanche learned early that a white woman had a ransom value out of all proportion to her usefulness around a lodge of painted buffalo hides. She was worth as much as $2,000 in trade and cash, and for this reason, primarily, was highly prized. There was another reason if no ransom was forthcoming. The Comanche did not permit prostitution by their own women, and marital infidelity was severely punished. This fact, or the rumor of it, was known in the settlements and lent wings to the dollars that flowed onto the High Plains in pursuit of wife, mother, or sweetheart. Witness a composite ransom paid for such captives by a *Comanchero* acting as intermediary for a distraught relative: 40 strands of beads; 10 pints of powder; 16 yards of blue drilling; 4 butcher knives; 12 yards of striped cloth; 4 bridles; 8 yards of strouding; 12 bars of lead; 6 plugs of tobacco; 6 rounds of brass wire; 1 horse; miscellaneous mirrors and other gew-gaws; plus an undisclosed amount of cash.

Is it any wonder that the Comanche regarded the white man's valuation of his women as a golden opportunity? Regardless of *los Comancheros'* morals, or lack of them, the fact that they afforded a means for the Comanche to dispose of their captives profitably meant that the slaughter of captives on a whim, or after their usefulness was gone, ceased as a general Comanche policy. There was hope for their recovery where none had been otherwise. This statement was made in the staid pages of an official report of the United States Government in the late 1830's.

The trade was extensive and well organized by 1849, the year that gold was discovered in California and led additional thousands of people and livestock within striking distance of the Comanche as they made their painful way to El Dorado. In this year alone, the Comanche killed 175, carried 25 into captivity, and stole livestock valued at over $100,000; these figures do not include their take in Mexico and are otherwise incomplete. Again, in a four-month period in 1859, ten years later, they killed 53 Texans, carried off half a dozen captives for ransom, and stole over 1800 head of horses, including 70 cavalry mounts from Fort Cooper, then under the jurisdiction of Colonel Robert E. Lee. Even the Comanche felt that business was brisk, but not so the traders. *Los Comancheros* and their Anglo-Saxon counterparts along Red River, men like Jesse Chisholm of Chisholm Trail fame, would stake their customers to an outfit—guns, provisions, and whisky—on credit. Being thus in debt, the Comanche had to take the plunder road again to pay it off.

The war with Mexico changed governments at Santa Fé but not the principles of the trade. New land was opened up, ranches were being stocked with animals, and beef contracts were being let to feed the first reservationized Indians. The *Comanchero* trade continued to grow, reaching its

fullest flowering in the decade following Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Men like Apodaca Anaya, Juan Trujillo and Jose Tafolla were the *hidalgos* of the trade.

After Appomattox, the basic trade commodity of the Comanches changed from horses and mules to one item —*cattle*—the wild longhorns that were trailed out of Texas to stock the buffalo ranges of the West. The herds were trailed through the very heart of *Comancheria* by men like Goodnight, Loving, Slaughter, Jinglebob Chisum, and Snyder. Even as the original trade had been made possible, and profitable, by the connivance of Spanish officials, so the latter days of the trade were made possible, and even more profitable than ever, by the connivance, support, and financial backing of the Indian agents and army officers who brought such discredit upon the presidency of U. S. Grant. The beef contracts for the reservation Indians, the food animals for the Army posts, the demand for stockers to graze the burgeoning ranges—all these swelled the demand to unprecedented heights, and *los Comancheros* and *los Barbaros,* the Comanche, felt right at home in the familiar surroundings of theft, trade, and graft.

This was the Golden Age of *los Comancheros,* and none was more gilded than Jose Pieda Tafolla. His wagon trains, his pack trains, rolled out onto the High Plains in serried ranks, and the herds of stolen cattle flowed back into New Mexico to the delight of his purse and the profound annoyance of men like Charles Goodnight. In 1870 one of many sporadic and half-hearted attempts to control the trade resulted in the capture of one of Tafolla's pack trains. There were 120 burros loaded with whisky and ammunition; there were, also, five burros loaded with *piloncillo,* the staple of the trade back in 1720.

It is not of record that this loss embarrassed Don Jose. He had a partner, the commanding officer of Fort Bascom, near present-day Tucumcari. Thousands upon thousands of cattle that he bought from the Comanche at the rate of three head for one cup of whisky, or comparable value, he sold to the Army, or other interested parties, for $2.50 a head, delivered at Fort Bascom. There was no recourse under the law, and even Charles Goodnight, that dour Lion-Heart of the High Plains, had to admit defeat. Goodnight took his case to court, at Fort Sumner in Lincoln County, proved by the testimony of *los Comancheros* themselves that they had stolen over 250,000 head of cattle out of Texas, and, as Goodnight himself expressed it, "Was damn lucky to get out of court with my life!"

The money was so easy, there was so much of it, that *los Comancheros* and their Comanche partners encountered more and more competition in the marts of the thievery—competition that came from the border breed of Anglo-Saxon, the cat-eyed, rawhide-tough men who lived off other men's livestock by the grace of Judge Colt and their own superb reflexes. They were rustlers, plain, pure and simple, and if they had one redeeming feature, it was that they did most of their own stealing. They were never a part of *los Comancheros* but they hid behind the known activities of these traders and managed to lay the blame for their rustling on the Comanche. Truly, it was a para-

dise for these renegades such as the West has never seen before, or since —a paradise that made possible theft without odium, rustling without responsibility. They gave the *Comanchero* trade a bad name and in the New Mexico of 1875-80, you didn't call a man *"Comanchero,"*—with or without a smile.

The trade that had endured for a century and a half seemed destined to continue so long as the grass should grow, but the handwriting was on the wall. More literally, it was scrawled across the face of the High Plains in the decaying carcasses of dead buffalo—buffalo by the tens of hundreds of thousands, killed for their hides to make belting for the factories of the East. Without the buffalo the Comanche was no Bold Buccaneer of the Plains, he was just a hungry Indian. He stole cattle, but he ate and lived off the buffalo. To save their buffalo, the Comanche under Quanah Parker, son of Cynthia Ann Parker, stolen from Texas, and of Pita Nokoni, fought the hide hunters at the 'Dobe Walls in 1874. The Comanche lost and in losing they set in motion against them the greatest concentration of military might yet assembled on the High Plains. A military force free, momentarily, from political pressure, under the overall command of Nelson A. Miles. It was a winter campaign and it was successful, thanks to *los Comancheros* or, at least, one of them.

One arm of Miles' three-pronged offensive was led by Ranald McKenzie, who knew the Plains, knew Indians, and knew the practices of *los Comancheros*. So, when he encountered Jose Tafolla prowling across his line of march in search of the last bit of trade before the season closed, perhaps in search of military information he could relay to the Comanche, McKenzie seized opportunity by the throat.

Tafolla, knowing full well where his bread was buttered, *"no sabed"* until McKenzie lost patience. Lacking a convenient tree, he up-ended one of Don Jose's two-wheeled carts and from the convenient height thus obtained he strung up Don Jose and lowered him just before he strangled. He repeated this performance several times, like ducking a Salem witch on a ducking-stool, until the cords of Don Jose's memory were loosened. The Comanche never forgave Tafolla for their surprise and the crushing defeat that followed. It was the end of the Comanche and the end of *los Comancheros*. The trade was ended but the heritage lived on.

Many of the *los Comancheros* turned to livestock raising on a full-time basis. What could be more natural in view of their past experience? Their home ranches in New Mexico supplied winter feed, and they took up summer grazing-lands in the High Plains of Texas that they knew so well from past rendezvous. It was a grand combination for year-round grass. It had another advantage, too. Tax assessments in Texas were made on January first, each year, when the High Plains were still winter-locked. Tax assessments in New Mexico were made on March first when the High Plains were just coming into grass. What would you do? *Los Comancheros* turned stockmen did it too. What they had learned from the Indian they applied to the tax assessor.

DEBT CANCELED

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

GOVERNOR HONEST JOHN TRAVIS, *under obligation to Old Bill Allen for a good many years for gun services rendered; takes the first train for Sage when he hears that Old Bill is under arrest for the killing of Silver Spur Ord. Once there, he finds he has to buck Steve Ludlow, Summit county's political boss, but he goes into battle with one hard-to-beat advantage—John Travis deserves the appellation of "Honest." This story appears in print here for the first time.*

THE smart money had been bet against Honest John Travis's being elected governor, but smart money or not, Travis went into office by ten thousand votes. If there had been another election at the end of his first year, he'd have tripled that majority. The politicos who played the angles, like Sheriff Steve Ludlow over in Summit county, couldn't figure it out.

There were two good reasons for Travis's popularity. The state was still young enough for the voters to be proud of a man with Travis's colorful past. He'd been everything from a cowboy to a gun guard on a stage and a lawman in the Black Hills during the gold rush.

The second reason was more important, and one that a man of Steve Ludlow's caliber would never understand. Travis was one of the politicians in the state who deserved the sobriquet "Honest." That was why Travis took the first train for Summit county when he heard that Old Bill Allen was in jail for killing Silver Spur Ord.

It was early afternoon when Travis stepped down from the coach in Sage, the county seat. He went immediately to Judge Ira Weston's office in the courthouse. Weston was talking with the district attorney, Ed Hovey, when Travis stepped into the room. Neither saw him until he said, "Howdy, Ira. Howdy, Ed."

Weston was the first to recognize Travis. He rose and held out his hand. "How are you, Governor?" he asked cordially. "This is almost as surprising as if the President had walked in."

"Not quite, I guess." Travis shook Weston's hand and turned to Hovey.

"You should have warned us you were coming, Governor." Hovey's fat hand gripped Travis's briefly. "Or is this a personal investigation of the political integrity of Summit county?"

"Something like that," Travis said. He took the cigar that Weston offered and walked to the window. They were good men, both of them, if you could say that of men who kept their ears to the political wind. In Summit county Steve Ludlow blew that wind in the direction which suited his interest. "Steve around?"

Neither answered for a moment. Weston made a ceremony of getting his cigar going. Hovey, a pudgy man who was fighting a losing battle with an expanding stomach and wore his vest corset-tight, drew a carefully folded silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. A little smile touched the corners of Travis's lips. He understood the situation here in Summit county, and he knew Steve Ludlow.

"Why, I guess he's in his office," Weston said finally.

"I'd like to see him."

Neither Weston nor Hovey made a move to go after the sheriff. They reversed the former by-play, Hovey fumbling for a cigar and Weston producing a handkerchief and wiping his face. Travis, looking from one to the other, lost his smile.

"I see," Travis said. "You boys think Steve won't want to see me."

"Why, it's just—" Hovey began, and stopped. "I'll fetch him."

"Wait a minute, Ed." Weston moved around his desk to the window. "It's a funny thing, John—ever since Old Bill Allen's been in jail, he's been hollering that you'll get him out. I'm wondering if that's the reason you're here."

"You're guessing well, Ira," Travis murmured.

Weston tongued the cigar to the other side of his mouth. Pink-cheeked and bald, almost as pudgy as Hovey, he made a sharp contrast with stringy John Travis. Weston was not a judge whose decisions could be bought—Travis knew that; but he also knew that both Weston and Hovey were up for election that fall and both liked their jobs.

"You'd be smart to let the local officials handle Old Bill." Weston was watching a man trim the shrubbery around the jail. "Summit county gave you a thousand votes and you can thank Steve Ludlow for it."

Travis didn't argue. What Weston said was true. It was also true that Steve Ludlow had wanted a change in the governor's chair and had considered Travis the lesser of two evils.

"All right, Ira," Travis said mildly. "Steve doesn't want to see me, so we'll forget it. How about bringing Old Bill in?"

"We couldn't do that," Hovey said quickly. "Steve hasn't let him see anyone."

"I see." There was no indication on the governor's high-boned face or in his gray eyes that anger was coming to a boil in him. "You must consider Old Bill a dangerous man."

"He killed Ord," Hovey said. "No doubt about it. Steve figures he'll confess, and that would save the county some money."

"What does Old Bill have to say?"

"Nothing." Hovey pulled at an ear. "Funny thing. He won't say what happened."

"Look, John," Weston said earnestly. "Ord was no good. We all know that, and his cashing in saved Sage from a hell of a fight. What we ought to do is to give Old Bill a medal for beefing him, but the law doesn't read that way about murder. It'll have to take its course. Now why don't you come out to my place this afternoon? I've got a new white-face bull I want you to see. We'll have a good supper and you can take the night train back to the capital."

"I hope to catch that train, and thanks for the invitation." Travis fingered the ash from his cigar. "One of these days I'll take you up. Ed, what happened the day Ord was killed?"

"We were headed for trouble as fast as the devil could take us," the district attorney answered. "Ord's Silver Spur was the biggest saloon in town and the wild bunch hung out there. The last year or so some of the worst toughs in the country drifted in and stayed. Steve didn't want them around, but there wasn't much he could do."

"Old Bill hung out there, too?"

Hovey nodded. "Got to be a regular bar-fly. Drunk most of the time. His rheumatism was so bad that I guess he was in pain a lot and whisky deadened it. Anyhow, Ord seemed to like him—even gave him a bed in his house and Bill did a few chores around the place to pay for it. None of us have figured out why he plugged Ord. Maybe they got into a row and Bill was drunk."

"What about this trouble you were talking about?"

"Why, it was shaping up to a showdown between Ord's wild bunch and the rest of the town. We've had too many holdups and killings in the last year that are still unsolved. Steve figured it was Ord's outfit, but there wasn't any proof. We couldn't handle it legally, so we organized a Citizen's Protective League and told the toughs they had to get out of town. Ord didn't like it. He closed up the saloon and went to his house. He said they'd fight."

"But the fight didn't come off?"

"No. Ord was killed about four o'clock that afternoon. Steve went out there about five to try to talk Ord and his bunch into leaving. All the toughs were gone, Ord was dead with a slug between his eyes, and Old Bill was sitting in the front room with a forty-five in his fist. He told Steve he killed Ord, but he didn't give any reason. Now he won't talk at all. Just clams up."

"Won't even sign a confession that he killed Ord," the judge said in disgust.

"So he's been cooling his heels in jail," Travis said bluntly, "until Steve gets a confession out of him."

"That's about it," Weston agreed reluctantly. "It isn't right, but I never interfere with the way Steve runs his office."

Travis rose. "Then I guess I will," he said, and started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Weston demanded.

"To the jail. I'm going to talk to Old Bill."

"Why can't you let it go?" Weston groaned.

"Because the whole thing stinks," Travis said bluntly. "Steve's pulled off some funny things. This is one too many."

"So the governor is personally going to look into it." Steve Ludlow stood in the doorway, a small carefully groomed man with tiny black eyes set astride a sharp nose. "Aren't you out of your ballywick, Honest John?"

Ludlow had put a mild emphasis on the word "honest." Travis had learned long ago to control his temper, but it had been years since he'd had as difficult a time doing it as he did now.

"No, Steve," Travis said finally, his tone even. "The whole state's my ballywick. That includes Summit county."

"Why kick up a dust about Old Bill Allen?" Ludlow asked mildly. "He's just a drunk. Nobody's going to worry about him."

"I will," Travis said. "I knew him in the Black Hills years ago. What's more important is the fact that he's an American citizen."

"Ideals are strong medicine, John," Ludlow murmured. "Suppose I don't let you see Old Bill?"

"Then I'd know something was wrong," Travis said quickly, "and I'd act accordingly."

Ludlow pulled a pipe from his pocket and tapped it idly against a palm, black eyes pinned on Travis, his smile unreadable. He was a mild-mannered man, sparing in his gestures and soft-voiced, but he was also a shrewd gambler who took long chances only when the stakes warranted it.

"All right, John," Ludlow said at last. "I'll get Old Bill."

Hovey and Weston moved restlessly around the room. Travis stood at the window and watched them with controlled amusement. They hated themselves, Travis thought, for the choice they had made somewhere back along the trail. He didn't think they had any part in Ludlow's political chicanery. It was likely a matter of looking the other way.

Now they were worried, for the next few moments might bring them to the place where they had to choose between the governor and Summit county's political boss, a choice that men of their caliber never liked to make.

It was ten minutes before Ludlow returned with Old Bill Allen. The old man paused in the doorway, cloudy eyes fixed on Travis a moment before he recognized him, and Travis, staring back, felt a sickness crawl into him. This stooped, dirty-bearded man with the whisky-fogged eyes and the hands twisted with

rheumatism bore little resemblance to the gutty lawman he had known in the Black Hills.

"Here's your old friend, John," Ludlow said. "I've got a man waiting in my office to see me. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Travis waited until he heard Ludlow's steps fade down the hall. Then he swung around the desk and strode to where Old Bill stood, his hand outstretched. "How are you, Bill?"

"John. Damn my eyes if it ain't John Travis."

Old Bill tried to grip Travis's hand, but his fingers didn't function. It was Travis's hand that closed over his.

"Sit down." Travis drew Old Bill across the room and maneuvered him into a chair at the end of the desk. "Been a long time, Bill."

"A hell of a long time. Say, you remember the night in Deadwood when you had to arrest—"

"I remember," Travis murmured. "That's why I'm here."

"I knew you'd come. Damned if I didn't." Old Bill threw a scornful look at the district attorney. "I told you he'd come and get me out of this jam, Hovey. Some men don't get too big for their pants. They don't forget their old friends. John's governor, and by hokey—"

"Oh, Bill," Travis cut in. "I wanted to ask you about what really happened when Ord was killed."

"What happened?" Old Bill rubbed a bearded cheek, gaze flicking to the doorway as if expecting to see Ludlow standing there. He brought his eyes to Travis. "I killed him. That's all. Shot him right between the eyes, by damn. Remember that night in Deadwood when I got Ace Morgan—"

"I remember." Travis flipped back the lid of Weston's cigar box and offered one to Old Bill. "Have a smoke on the judge, Bill."

"Sure. Better have something on him before he hangs something on me," Old Bill cackled. He stuffed the cigar into his mouth and fumbled for a match.

Travis said, "Here's a light, Bill," and held a match flame to the cigar.

Satisfaction crept into the old man's face. "Good cigar, Judge. Ain't had a smoke since the sheriff threw me into the jug. Ain't had a drink, neither."

"Now about Ord," Travis said. "Why did you plug him?"

Old Bill took a deep breath. "It was this way, John. Ord kept a bunch of tough hands around him. I knew a lot about what they was doing 'cause I was in the Silver Spur most of my time and I heard 'em talk. Besides, I slept at Ord's place, so I heard more of their scheming out there." Old Bill stared at his twisted hands. "Ord was plumb good to me, John. I ain't worth nothin' no more, but he put up with me and I done a few jobs to kind of pay back."

"He was good to you," Travis murmured, "so you plugged him." He shook his head. "Bill, that doesn't make any sense at all."

Old Bill slumped down in his chair. He stared at the floor for a long moment, and then, raising his head, looked at Hovey from under hooding gray brows. He took another deep breath.

"I guess it don't." He gripped his cigar between thumb and bent fingers and took it from his mouth. "Ord's bunch was robbing stages and holding up banks in other counties and playing hell. Then they'd come back here and Ord would hide 'em out. Give 'em an alibi to boot.

"Got so bad that Hovey and the sheriff and some more got some law-abiding folks together and rigged up a sort of vigilante committee. Only Ord wouldn't pull out like they told him. He was fixing to use his outfit to fight. There'd have been a hell of a lot of killings, John."

Old Bill straightened, shoulders pressed against the back of his chair. "You know what I used to stand for, John. When I ain't too drunk I still stand for the same things. I warned Ord he'd gone too far. I says to him there ain't no sense in getting half the folks in town killed. He'd made his pile and he'd be smart to get out. He says no. He was aiming to hang and rattle. So I plugged him. Right between the eyes, John—hell of a good shot it was."

"No, Bill," Travis said thoughtfully. "That wasn't the way it happened."

"Don't tell us you were there," Hovey said.

"No, but I did have a special agent nosing around. He was in Ord's bunch and he told me how the thing was rigged. Bill, I know exactly what you believed in. That's why I can't think you've thrown in with a thieving coyote like Ludlow."

"Now hold on, John—" Judge Weston began.

"Stay out of this, Ira. Look, Bill—we've beaten around the bush long enough. Some things never change in a man. You can get down and crawl to Steve Ludlow when he whistles. You can act like a whipped pup because he's been paying for your drinks and grub, but you're not a whipped pup inside. You hate yourself because the pride you used to have is still in you. You think it's gone but it isn't. You've drowned it with whisky — that's all. When you get sober it's there again. That's why you kept going back to Ord's saloon to get drunk."

Ludlow was in the doorway then, the mask of courtesy gone from his face. "That's enough, Travis," he snarled. "You wanted to hear Bill tell what happened. You heard. Now he's going back to the jug."

"Don't make a move, Ludlow." Travis laid a .45 on the desk beside Old Bill. "I'm cleaning house today, and Summit county's had a damned dirty house for a long time. Look at him, Bill. A small-time crook who bought your help with whisky, and you're ashamed of yourself for giving it to him. Ace Morgan and his outfit were men, Bill. Bank robbers and killers, sure, but they didn't make any bones about what they were. They didn't hide behind a sheriff's star."

"So help me, Travis—" Ludlow bellowed.

"Shut up, Ludlow! I'll tell you what happened, Bill. You were out there in Ord's house all right. You'd been telling Ludlow what he wanted to know about Ord so he could make the toughs dig up for protection. Ludlow had so much hollering on his hands he had to clean things up,

but Ord wouldn't go. He told Ludlow he'd let it out how he'd been paying for protection, so Ludlow had to kill him to shut him up. He got you drunk and put a bullet between Ord's eyes."

"Ord was dead when I got there," Ludlow cut in. "Your yarn—"

"I told you to shut up, Ludlow. Listen, Bill. He left. Then he went back. He pretended to find the body so he could lay it onto you. There was nothing to hold the tough bunch together when Ord cashed in, so they rode out. That left Ludlow sitting pretty again."

"You don't have any proof, Travis," Ludlow raged.

"It isn't a question of proof, Bill." Travis shoved the gun at Old Bill. "It's a question of how much man you've got left in you. There was plenty when you gave me a hand against Ace Morgan's bunch. I'm betting there's plenty in you now. All you had to do was to get the whisky worked out of your carcass."

Old Bill put a hand on the gun butt and jerked it back. "I'm no good any more, John," he muttered. "Can't hang onto a gun."

"You didn't kill Ord, but you know Ludlow did," Travis pressed. "You were sober enough to see what went on, weren't you? Ludlow made some promises about getting you off if you'd sit in jail awhile. He hasn't done it, Bill. He never will. He'll see you swing. Look at him, Bill. Guilty as hell. You've seen men hanging from a rope. He's got a loop ready—"

It happened then exactly as John Travis wanted it to happen. Old Bill grabbed the gun, almost lost it, fumbled with it while he tried to cock it. Then he had the hammer back, an ominous sound breaking into the pool of quiet, a sound that cracked Steve Ludlow. That, too, was what John Travis had counted on. Ludlow jerked his gun from its holster.

Travis's gun thundered the same instant Old Bill's did, but Bill's slug went wild through the doorway. It was Travis's bullet that made the little hole between Steve Ludlow's black eyes.

Old Bill was still shaking from relief after they'd taken Ludlow's body across the street to the undertaker's, but he managed to crow, "Got him dead-center, John. Crookeder'n any sidewinder you ever seen. I should o' got him a long time ago, but I didn't think I could shoot that straight."

"You're a good man yet, Bill." Travis drew a handful of gold coins from his pocket. "Sometimes it takes the public a long time to get around to rewarding the men who make the law mean something, but generally it does after a while. This came through the other day for killing Ace Morgan. I made the trip to give it to you personally."

Old Bill seemed to have something in his eyes. He rubbed them with his knuckles, choked, and shook his head. "I'm sure beholden, John. I—I—"

"Forget it." Travis looked at Hovey. "I guess there's no charge against Bill now, is there?"

"No," the district attorney said.

"I think you've got some rewards coming, Bill. I'll see that you get

them. Let the booze alone." He turned to Weston. "Ira, if that invitation—"

"Still good, Governor," Weston said briskly.

That night Travis and Judge Weston stood beside the loading-platform of the depot, the locomotive whistle a distant sound.

"I guess Ed and I had about as much backbone as a jellyfish," Weston said apologetically, "but if we'd made a move against Steve—"

"I know," Travis murmured. They'd both be better men with Steve Ludlow gone.

"If you had a secret agent in here, why didn't you take his evidence and turn it over to Hovey?"

"He didn't have any real proof. Besides, he'd have been worthless for any other jobs if he'd appeared in court." Travis smiled a little then. "There's another thing, too, Ira. I doubt if the legal machinery of Summit county would have held up against Steve."

The judge went "Harumph," and scraped a toe across the cinders. "I don't know why you thought Old Bill would try to use that gun, or how you knew it was Steve instead of Bill."

"If you'd used your head," Travis said, unable to keep the scorn out of his voice, "you'd have known that Bill couldn't shoot fast enough or straight enough to have drilled Ord. I wanted you to see him try to use an iron so you'd know he couldn't have done it."

"But he's been a drunken bum ever since he's been in Sage—"

"He was one of the guttiest lawmen I ever knew when he was in Deadwood," Travis cut in, "and he had the most pride. The trouble was he got stove up so he couldn't pack a star. He lost his savings in some bad investments, and he got to brooding about the rotten deal he'd got. That's why he's been a bum here, but I knew that if I could stir some of his old pride, he'd make a try. He'll be a different man now, Ira."

The judge went "Harumph" again. "Hovey and I will see a few more rewards get paid."

The train was there then, the headlight tunneling the darkness. "So long," Travis said, and swung aboard.

He dropped into a seat, shoulders slack, suddenly very tired. A governor couldn't go around doing jobs like this, but thinking back to that smoky night in Deadwood when Ace Morgan and his bunch had gone down before his and Bill Allen's guns, he felt only satisfaction that he had been able to do what he had today. In the book of his past he could write, *Debt canceled.*

Answers to OLD WEST MOVIES *Quiz* on page 124

1. Jon Hall
2. Jean Arthur
3. Henry Fonda
4. Joel McCrea
5. Bruce Cabot
6. Randolph Scott
7. Tyrone Power
8. John Carradine
9. Robert Taylor
10. Richard Dix

A ZGWM Original Fact Feature

QUANA PARKER, *by blood half-white and half-Comanche, but emotionally all Indian, leads the fierce attack on 'Dobe Walls, then continues to defy the rules imposed by the whites by staying off the reservation. Finally, however, he bows to the inevitable. This little object-lesson in survival through compromise and adaptation was written especially for* ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

Chief Quana Takes the White Man's Road

By EDWIN L. SABIN

DAWN of June 24, 1874, broke red over the South Canadian River bottoms of the Texas northern Panhandle. All was quiet at the mud-built Adobe Walls trading-post and hide depot which served this Southwest buffalo range. Of the 29 persons—buffalo hunters, freighters, employees, and the wife of the storekeeper—at the post, only one or two were astir. Nobody could have imagined that a short distance to eastward, down river, 700 allied Comanches, Kiowa Apaches, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahos, commanded by Quana, young Comanche free-lance chief, were forming for the charge in a great try to wipe the white hide butchers from the face of the country. Quana, half white-blood, had planned this try.

The quiet at the trading-post was shattered by an alarm cry, by drum of hoofs, and by chorused whoops as the line raced through the sunrise bottoms in a solid front topped by a surf of feathered heads and brandish-

ed bows and guns. Hasty guns smoked from the post windows, but the charge struck, poured through among the buildings, left warriors to batter and pry at shutters and doors; reformed beyond, pelted back, carried through, formed again . . .

There was no way of getting into the thick-walled buildings; there was no safety from the heavy buffalo guns anywhere on the grounds. I-sa-tai, Comanche medicineman, had promised that the post should be flattened and the white men killed with clubs, but his medicine was no good. Quana tried a siege. The post guns outranged his own; these buffalo hunters shot strong and true, and had plenty of supplies. At the close of the fourth day he gave orders to quit, but he chaptered off one of the most desperately organized Indian attacks in Plains history.

Chief Quana was 30. His father had been Peta Nokoni, or Wanderer, chief of the Kwahadis, the Antelope Eaters clan of rovers. His mother (as he came to know) had been a white girl carried off in a raid into Texas by Comanches and Kiowas. She grew up as a Comanche, and became the first wife of Quana's father. When he was born he was named Kwaina, or Fragrant. At 15 he lost both his father and his mother. Texas Rangers surprised the Kwahadi village in camp in the Panhandle. His father, Chief Peta Nokoni, was killed while singing his death song and thrusting about with his lance. His mother was taken back to the Texas settlements. Quana escaped in the brush.

His mother, as he remembered her, had light skin and blue eyes. No white blood showed in Quana; he was dark, all Indian, true son of his Comanche father. He was large and strong; he won warrior rank, and succeeded to the head of the Kwahadi clan by making off with a girl claimed as wife by an older man, rich in horses.

After the attacks on the trading-post were over with, the Cheyennes and Arapahos rode north to spread the war there. Quana, with his Antelopes, and Chief Lone Wolf, with his band of Kiowas, traveled south. Soldiers would be coming and they did not propose to be cut off from their safe country of the Staked Plain. They heard that the men of the fort had stuck the heads of 12 warriors upon a row of poles on top of the corral walls. The insult was something bitter in the throat.

Fifty Tejanos Rangers tried to stop the way. In the day-long battle they were stood off, forced to dismount and lie down. Having lost many horses and several men, they could make no more trouble. The way on was open.

But the hearts of the Kiowas grew weak. Lone Wolf was anxious about the women and children left in a secret camp behind. He and his men decided to wipe off their war paint and go back to the reservation where the Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, and Arapahos were supposed to live.

Lone Wolf made a mistake, for he was arrested and imprisoned. Things out here were bad through the summer and fall and winter. Soldiers and Texans searched the country. The Staked Plain was not safe. In the spring word came that the Arapahos and Cheyennes, who had been fighting in the north, had surrendered to make peace. But Quana, son of Peta Nokoni, stayed out with his Antelopes.

They all were vowed to live free.

They were not of any reservation. Why should they go in to live under white-man laws? He was Comanche —that white blood flowed in his veins was a lie. He would fight and die as his father had fought and died.

This summer the white buffalo hunters came back. Their guns watched the trails and water holes. The buffalo got scarce. The Texans rode up from the south; soldiers marched and camped and built forts. There were fights; white men were killed, but so were Comanches; the white men's empty places filled again, but the empty places left by Quana's dead warriors could not be filled.

He stayed out for a year more. The country was grown narrow. His family was often hungry. Sense told him that there was no use in fighting the white man longer, only to be hunted down like a wolf. It was better to go in while he was free, and learn white-man life.

He would not go in hiding under a blanket, as Lone Wolf had done. He sent word ahead that Quana was coming to the fort on the reservation to take the soldier chief there by the hand. The soldier chief, Mackenzie, at Fort Sill of the Comanche agency, did not shame him by shutting him up, but treated him like a man.

Now he was known as Quana Parker. The Quana stood for the Comanche in him, put there by his father, Peta Nokoni. The Parker stood for the white man in him, put there by his mother, Cynthia Ann Parker, who had died grieving for him and his father soon after she had been taken back to her white relatives.

The two bloods in him got along together very well. He could be either Comanche or white. His mother's blood, he was told, said that he should have only one wife at a time; his father's blood said that several wives, according to the Comanche way, was better. He picked up a kind of English. He could speak to Washington for the Indians, and to the Indians for Washington. He counseled the Comanches and Kiowas to raise crops and cattle in the white man's way, but not to give up their old-time ceremonies. He posed as tribal chief of the Comanches, appointed by Washington, although Comanche laws required a full-blooded Comanche for that office.

Sometimes he wore white man's store clothes, even to derby hat perched above his braids and brass earrings; sometimes Comanche costume . from moccasins to trailing plumy bonnet and turkey-feather fan. He traveled much, on exhibit as Quana, the Comanche turned white man; to Fort Worth, where in the hotel bedroom he gained real white-man experience by blowing out the gas; to Washington, where he rode in Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration parade.

Quana Parker lived to a ripe old age upon the reservation in southwest Oklahoma—tall, stately, handsome, shrewd, prosperous with lands and herds and a large two-story farmhouse for himself, his wives, and his children. The crimsoned fury of the Adobe Walls trading-post in the Texas Panhandle was a far, far cry.

The Trail of a Fool

By

Eugene Cunningham

ORDERED *into the Tornillo country to put a stop to the widespread horse thievery in that district, young Ranger Ware undergoes the embarrassing experience of having his own black stallion stolen. It can, of course, prove nothing but a fool's trick in the end—can it? This exciting Ranger Ware yarn was first published in* Frontier Stories *in 1927.*

WARE—who had upon a time, both in the Rangers and outside, been known as "Ware's Kid"—found Cholla rather more than normally active by the standards of a Southwestern cow town in late afternoon. Up and down the single sandy street the hitchracks before the several saloons were nearly hidden from view by tethered cow ponies. He reined in Rocket, his big black stallion, midway between the ends of the twin rows of low adobes that constituted the place and slouched comfortably in the saddle to study the fronts of saloons, stores, and eating-houses with thoughtful gray-green eyes. Crudely printed posters upon divers house walls informed him that the reason for the activity he noted was an election.

It seemed to him that, if those horse thieves from Los Tornillos way made Cholla their headquarters, he was as likely to stumble upon some trace of them in one place as in another. He had nothing more to go upon, in seeking them now in Cholla, than the word of that youthful Mexican sheepherder met two days before. This youngster—with whom the Ranger had shared a meal—had let slip a remark concerning a certain quintet of horsemen who had passed him as he herded his master's sheep.

"So they moved with this *manada* to the west, Señor, toward Cholla. I suppose that to the ranches up there they sell their horses, then, in Chollá, spend the money. Ah! It must be a pleasant life, that of—"

Then suddenly he had seemed to become afraid. No prompting—and Ware spoke Spanish as fluently as English—had served to extract from him more than mumbled protests that he knew nothing, nothing at all.

Little enough, in a way, but it was all that Ware had to go on. He had

been ordered by the captain of his company to go into the Tornillo country, where much fine saddle stock had been disappearing mysteriously. He had been told only to stop the stealing. Of the identity of the thieves, or their method of operation, he had been told nothing—for nothing, it seemed, was known.

From the Palace Saloon, directly across from where he had halted the stallion, now came the muffled voices of a number of men, with, as overtone, the asthmatic squeal of an ancient accordion. Ware touched Rocket with a spur, then kneed the stallion across to the Palace's hitchrack.

He slipped down—a smallish figure, 18 or 19 at most, who rode as if he and the great stallion were one—, pulled the split reins of the Mexican bridle over the big black's head and twisted them deftly in a looped half-hitch over the rail. Rocket nuzzled his rider's shoulder and Ware, from a pocket of his embroidered Mexican jacket, drew a leathery *tortilla* and fed it to the stallion. Then he turned and clicked across the board-floored veranda of the saloon with the stiff-legged gait of the horseman born.

In the doorway he halted, as any wise man would have done in that day and place, to stare up and down the long smoke-wreathed noisy room. Here, too, he saw crudely painted election posters upon the plastered walls. Obviously there were men from several outfits at the long bar. This was apparent by the way they gathered unconsciously in little knots about their drinks. Several youngsters were jigging in the corner to the left of the door, around an ancient Negro who, with swaying gray-wooled head, pumped frantically at his accordion.

Ware edged in between two of the groups and ordered a drink. Those who chanced to see him enter stared curiously at the Mexican finery, at the bronzed expressionless face, the inscrutable gray-green eyes, that were shaded by the wide brim of bullion-ornamented sombrero. They noted the absence of any visible weapons, for he had left the little Winchester carbine in its saddle scabbard.

Apparently he did not mark the attention he had drawn. He tossed down his drink, then half turned with left elbow upon the bar to make aimless circles with empty glasses while he seemed to watch the dancers about the Negro musician.

He was by no means trying to pick from this crowd his horse thieves. He knew far too well that, if and when he identified them, they would be no different in appearance from any other cowboy. Rather, he sought for some incident which might lead to evidence.

His successes in the past, the successes which had given him a reputation, had come to him usually in a way that seemed to the casual observer accidental. Actually, he had discovered the man he wanted because of his trick of being ever patiently on the alert for some tiny happening that, properly considered and followed up, was like a door opening. So now he leaned easily against the bar, confident that if he but watched long enough and carefully enough the men would reveal themselves somehow.

There was one cowboy upon the edge of the jigging group who watched the Ranger furtively. He was not dancing, this stocky, yellow-haired,

round-faced youth. Ware hardly noted him, for there was that about the cowboy which would lead men to pass him over unconsciously, a certain insignificance that was as apparent as a label. But, staring absently at the dancers, Ware stared directly past the cowboy, and apparently the youngster believed himself to be the target of that inscrutable regard.

He kept turning, apparently without seeing the motionless figure up the bar, glancing toward the saloon door as if expecting someone to enter, but each time eyeing Ware. At last he seemed to grow uncomfortable and at the same time emboldened by Ware's quiet, for he whirled and glared at the Ranger. They were perhaps 20 feet apart when for the first time their eyes met squarely.

"Well!" snarled the cowboy. "Reckon yuh'll know me ag'in?"

Ware made no reply. This sudden thrusting into his attention of a heretofore almost unnoticed figure somewhat surprised him, but he evinced his feeling by no alteration of brown face; merely watched the cowboy levelly.

The latter's courage seemed to swell with the Ranger's negligent attitude. He stood with his hands upon hips and glared furiously. Ware had an odd feeling that the fellow had recognized him as a Ranger. This instinct was verified by the cowboy's next remark.

"Reckon yuh think just 'cause yuh're a Ranger yuh can come hellin' it around Cholla! Well, I'm tellin' yuh right now that—"

"Shut up!" snapped Ware abruptly.

Other sounds in the saloon had been hushed. In the silence the command cracked like a whiplash. Men started involuntarily. The effect of the words upon the cowboy surprised all in the barroom—not excepting Ware—for the heavy Colt sagging at the fellow's right hip came flashingly into his hand.

He leaped straight at the still motionless Ranger. Oddly, he seemed to forget to flip back the hammer, but instead jerked it aloft like a club. Men held their breath, finding no sign of a weapon about the Ranger.

But Ware's amazement held him still only for the barest fraction of an instant; then—not for nothing had he practiced for weary hours at getting out his twin white-handled Colts from the concealed John Wesley Hardin holsters—his right hand slid beneath his jumper with the smooth speed of a snake disappearing into a hole and reappeared with a continuation of the same movement—Colt-armed.

He fired once, then the cowboy had cannoned into him, knocking him sideways. His boot toe caught upon a projecting plank of the rough floor and he went down. The cowboy stumbled, also, but did not fall; nor did he stop. Out through the door he went. Ware, rolling over, sent two bullets after him, but did no more than nick the door-facing. He came to his feet like a cat, but already the doorway was jammed with men watching the fugitive's flight.

Before Ware could push through them there sounded upon the street the beat of a horse's hoofs—of a horse roweled into a racing gallop. At the sound Ware shrugged and reholstered his Colt. After all, he had no particular reason to chase that fool, unless, perhaps, to discover the reason for his sudden panic.

For there was no doubt in Ware's

mind now that he had opportunity to consider the distorted face of the cowboy as he leaped forward, that the fellow had been moved by nothing but overpowering panic.

Then, with those in the doorway he moved outside to stare up and down the street. Already the rolling dust cloud was far away. A tiny grin lifted one corner of his thin mouth. The fellow, he thought, had a good horse. Unconsciously, he glanced toward the end of the hitchrack and his face twisted in sudden fury. For Rocket, the black stallion—his beloved Rocket—was gone!

Ware whirled. A knot of cowboys were staring at him.

"Sher'ff?" he rasped. "Marshal? Hell! Anybody with a badge!"

They eyed him curiously for an instant; then one jerked a thumb vaguely over-shoulder.

"This is election day," he grinned, "Jim Weatherbee's sher'ff now, but Tom White may be sher'ff tomorrow."

"Where's Weatherbee?"

A thickset man with brown, short-nosed, big-chinned face came down the street at this moment. He was amazingly bowed of leg and he toed in peculiarly with his right foot, the result of a fall beneath a stumbling horse. Upon his ancient, flapping vest was a small gold star.

"That's Weatherbee," the cowpuncher told Ware.

The sheriff, after a hard stare at Ware and a nod for the cowboys, would have gone on into the Palace, but Ware moved into his path.

"Fellow stole my stallion!" he snarled, then waited.

"Stole your stallion?" repeated Weatherbee blankly.

The cowboys, too, seemed surprised. Apparently, they had taken it for granted that the departing one had gone upon his own mount.

"Who was it?" snapped the sheriff.

"That fella Curly," said the cowboy who had been doing the talking. "'Twas in the Palace. Curly starts a riot with this fella, jerks a gun and rushes like he aims to pistol-whip him; then this fella draws. Shoots an' misses. Curly, he rams into him, knocks him over an' just keeps on goin'!"

"Want a hawss," snapped Ware. "Goin' to git Mr. Curly. Git him if I have to follow him rest o' my life."

"Now, calm down, young fella!" advised the sheriff. "I'm takin' keer o' things in this county. If somebody steals a hawss in Cholla, that's for me to handle. But the's somethin' funny about all this. Howcome Curly, he tangled with you?"

"Oh, hell!" exploded Ware, finding fluency in his rage. "Goin' to talk me to death? This Curly stole my stallion—best hawss in Texas. Done gone ten minutes now. Goin' to stand here gassin' till he's gone a week? I ain't askin' he'p from yuh. I'm askin' where can I git a hawss. Best 'n' in town. Want to buy him. Give twict what he's worth."

"Look here, young fella," exploded the sheriff. "I ain't a-takin' nothin' off smart alecks. When I ask questions around here I aim to git an answer."

"Oh, hell!" cried Ware. "He's started ag'in. Cain't *nobody* in this town talk sense?"

The sheriff's bulldog face was reddened with injured dignity. He had taken a half step toward Ware when from the door of the Palace came a big, capable-looking ranchman.

"Wait a minute, Weatherbee," said the big man calmly. "This boy's lost a pet hawss an' yuh can't hardly blame him fer bein' sore about it. Nat'rally he wants to be chasin' Curly, 'stead o' standin' here talkin' while Curly gits clean away."

"But I want to know," insisted the sheriff stubbornly.

"Now, now!" smiled the big man. "The boy's right. There's been a whole lot o' talkin' done, when ridin's the thing that gits a hawss thief. Who might yuh-all be, son?"

"Ranger. Think this Curly knowed it, too. Can *you* tell me where I can buy a hawss—a good hawss?"

"Do' know about buyin' one," drawled the big man. "But I might loan yuh one. Tell yuh what, Weatherbee: I'll put this boy abo'd my foreman's hawss an' trail along with him. Mebbe we'll catch up with Mister Curly."

"Not unless Rocket, he busts his laig," sneered Ware. "Ain't a hawss in this neck o' the woods can touch the poorest colt ever foaled out of a Swayn mare."

"Oh, ho!" nodded the big man curiously. "So that's a Swayn stallion yuh lost. Don't blame yuh fer r'arin' back." Then his big blue eyes narrowed suddenly. "Yo' name happen to be Ware?"

Impatiently Ware nodded, and the big man thrust out his hand swiftly.

"My name's Boggs," he volunteered, "an' I'm shore glad to meet yuh! We've heard about yuh-all. Now, come on! That bay there's my foreman's hawss. Take it an' welcome."

Ware waited for no further invitation. He jerked the reins loose and threw them over the bay's head with a flashing, critical glance at the animal. It was a half-blood and a fine horse, but by comparison with the vanished Rocket—

Boggs, too, had mounted. His animal was a tall, rawboned gray. He whirled it deftly and rode back to where the puzzled-faced sheriff waited.

"Now, don't yuh-all steal that election, Weatherbee," he grinned. "Give Tom White an even show, 'cause the people's will must be obeyed."

Ware, spurring the bay in the direction the fugitive Curly had taken, found his lead easily cut down by Boggs's ugly gray. The ranchman's eyes twinkled as he came alongside the Ranger.

"Ain't disputin' what yuh said about the stallion," he shouted above the thud of pounding hoofs, "but if we git back yo' Rocket I'd shore admire to run Major, here, ag'in him."

The trail of Rocket, the black stallion, was clear in the sand. For a mile beyond the outskirts of Cholla they followed it easily; then the sand thinned, giving way to barely covered rock. Boggs nodded.

"It'll be hard, now," he shouted in Ware's ear. "This patch o' rocky ground's pretty big. Even an Injun couldn't keep a trail up here."

And so it proved. The trail died abruptly and, circle as they would, they found no trace of hoofprints. Ware reined in the bay and stared glumly at Boggs. The ranchman crooked a leg comfortably about his saddle horn and built a cigarette, whistling soundlessly beneath his breath.

"What's beyond?" asked Ware.

"Well, sort o' depends on the direction," shrugged Boggs. "West o' here's Scalp Creek, an' farther west are the

Emigrant Mountains. T'other side the mountains there's *malpais* for a long way; then there's some scattered ranches—the Crowfoot outfit an' a few others."

"What's north o' Cholla?"

"Arrowhead outfit an', farther south, the Three Prod. My outfit, the Lazy D, is quite a way east o' town. Here!"

From a saddlebag he drew a folded newspaper and flattened it upon his knee. With the lead of a cartridge from his belt he outlined very roughly the layout of the region. Ware studied the map thoughtfully, then sat for minutes staring vacantly straight ahead.

"East of the Lazy D," he asked abruptly. "What's up that way?"

"Nothin' fer a long way. Mighty pore country."

"Curly come in with that last bunch o' hawsses from Tornillo, didn't he?"

Then, as Boggs hesitated, with blue eyes narrowed, calculatingly, Ware grinned slightly.

"Yeh, I thought he did! How many o' them hawsses did you buy for yourself, Boggs?"

Boggs still eyed him thoughtfully. At last a twinkle crept into his blue eyes.

"Am I—uh—talkin' in court-like?" he inquired blandly.

Ware grinned back at him with equal frankness. "Why, I reckon," he drawled, "I aim to git the hawss thieves, this trip, ruther'n the hawsses."

"A' right, then! Curly come up with the last bunch, like yuh said. About sixty head o' good stock, they brought. Me an' Jack Lowry o' the Arrowhead an' Wiggins o' the Three Prod, we split 'em about even. Them hawsses was right footsore, so we bought 'em pretty cheap."

"Where'd the fellows go?"

"Do' know," shrugged Boggs. "Curly, he stuck in Cholla. Others rode on north, I reckon. That was four-five days ago."

Again Ware studied the crude map. "Lazy D a hawss ranch?" he inquired abruptly.

"Why, pretty much," said Boggs. "So's the Arrowhead an' the Three Prod, 's far as that goes, though Wiggins, he runs right smart o' cows, too."

"How many o' yo' men in town today?"

"Today's election day," Boggs reminded him. "Tom White, he's put up consid'able battle ag'in Weatherbee. Country's all het up about it, so all the boys, barrin' just a hand or two on each ranch, is likely in Cholla today."

"When's election over? When'll they be goin' out?"

"Not till day after tomorrow sometime. The winner—Weatherbee or White—will throw a big dance tomorrow night, an' I reckon it'll be around noon the day after before some o' the boys'll be fit to fork a bronc."

Slowly Ware shook his head. "Well," he drawled, "I've rode some, seen right smart o' country, considerable folks, but yuh-all Cholla-people is about the easiest passel o' nitwits ever I come ag'inst. Come on, let's travel to the Lazy D."

"What's the big idee?" demanded Boggs, spurring his gray after Ware.

"Mister," said Ware, "when yuh take a look at yo' hawss pasture an' see the place where yo' hawss band used to be, yuh'll sho' sabe a heap."

Boggs gaped at him, but Ware set

a pace so furious through the brush that conversation was impossible for a couple of miles.

Actually Ware was furious. If what he believed were true, he had no more than an outside chance to recover Rocket. After a while he slackened gait a little so that Boggs could ride stirrup-to-stirrup with him.

The big ranchman's face was a study in mixed emotions, but now there was, chiefly, an odd expectancy in his expression, as if he waited for the younger man to take the initiative.

"Ain't sympathizin' with yuh-all none," snarled Ware at last. "Yuh ought to know a dog what brings a bone'll carry a bone. Yuh-all never got too cur'ous about them hawsses comin' from south. Well, map yuh drawed back there tells the whole story: Tornillo country's gittin' too hot for this gang. They figger—" He turned suddenly sideways in the saddle to glare at Boggs. "Who was leadin' this outfit?"

"Fella named Acree," replied Boggs meekly. "But I 'low mebbe 't weren't his real name."

"Yuh're learnin'!" Ware complimented him sourly. "How'd he look?"

"Little, dark-complected, good-lookin' hairpin."

"Left-handed?"

"Uh-huh! Uh-huh! Packed a .44 Colt on the right side, butt-front."

"Skeets Winder! Wanted in Goliad County for murder. Five hundred dollars reward."

"Yuh was sayin' 'they figgered'?" prompted Boggs.

"They figgered 't was time to move on. They brought this last bunch o' stuff nawth, an' unloaded on yuh-all. They knowed about election day. Figgered to clean up the Lazy D, the Arrowhead an' the Three Prod, then cross the Emigrants to the nawthwest an' come out on the railroad some'r's."

"The hell!" snarled Boggs.

It spoke much for both Ware's reputation and his personality that this big, capable ranchman accepted his deductions at face value. Boggs spurred the gray on as if he could not reach the Lazy D quickly enough. The bay could not keep up. At last Ware hailed Boggs and the ranchman slowed, if impatiently, until the Ranger could overtake him.

"Here's the way I figger!" grunted Ware. "They'll clean out the Lazy D first. It's furthest from the way they're goin' to head. That'll leave 'em the Three Prod and the Arrowhead. Both outfits is on the trail they'll nat'ally follow toward Scalp Creek and the Emigrants. Question is, which o' the two would they make for first—that is, if we don't find 'em at the Lazy D, which I figger we're too late for that. Arrowhead's closest to town. Reckon they'd go there first, then clean out the Three Prod?"

Boggs considered. "If she's like yuh think," he said slowly, "they got ever'thing figgered out to a gnat's hair. Chances are, one o' the bunch, anyhow, knows this country. So they'd know the only pass in the Emigrants around Cholla is due west o' the Arrowhead. So, they'd clean out the Three Prod first, after leavin' my place."

"How far do we have to ride to know about yo' hawss band?" inquired Ware frowningly.

"Four-five mile, yit. I got me a line camp between the ranch house an' town. Ought to be one man there"

Actually they knew almost beyond a doubt that it was as Ware had believed well before they reached the 'dobe shack that served as line camp. For they ran into the trail of a big horse band, a fresh trail, pointing somewhat north of west. Boggs swore bitterly and pushed on.

"If they've hurt Bill Roberts—" he gritted.

They found the Lazy D man just outside the 'dobe house. He was fairly riddled with bullets. On the ground before him was a six-shooter, lying where it had fallen from his dead fingers. Evidently he had been approached by men who did not alarm him; perhaps he had pulled his gun only after bullets had thudded into his own body. Ware picked up the Colt and turned the cylinder. Only two shells had been fired. He turned to Boggs, who was kneeling beside the dead man.

"How many yuh reckon's in this gang?"

"Four. Five, if Curly's caught up with 'em."

Ware nodded and looked swiftly about him. The open door of the 'dobe attracted him. He went inside the house and came out with an expression of satisfaction, bearing a Winchester carbine and a box of .44s. For, on the foreman's saddle had been no rifle.

"Ready?" he asked Boggs.

Boggs stared at him for a long half-minute, then nodded. "Young fella, I shore like yo' style," he said simply. "Five to two. Huh! Them fellows is shore goin' to hub hell!"

An odd, electric glint showed in Ware's gray-green eyes, but when he answered the rancher his tone was merely conversational "They're goin' to see some misery, an' see her through the smoke!" he nodded.

They followed the wide trail of the horse band. Ware took the lead now, motioning Boggs to keep half a head behind him. Finally, well beyond that point where, riding toward the line camp, they had first seen the trail, he grunted in a savage sort of satisfaction. Boggs, staring in the direction indicated by Ware's forefinger, nodded quickly. It was a tiny patch of red in the dust. Ware leaned far out of the saddle and swept his fingers through the spot; studied the smear upon them.

"Blood, a'right."

A couple of miles farther on they found a man lying in the greasewood to the right of the trail. They approached him cautiously, though he did not seem to hear the pound of the galloping hoofs. Ware's gun flashed in his hand; he slipped from the saddle and ran swiftly up to the prostrate figure and twitched the heavy six-shooter from the horse thief's holster. Then, only, did the man's eyes open feebly, and but for a moment. The front of his flannel shirt was caked with blood. Boggs swung down with face like brown granite, blue eyes icy, tense hand knotted around his Colt butt.

"Know 'im?" grunted Ware, staring down at the thin, brown face, now pallid with the death color.

"He was one o' the gang. They called him Pete," said Boggs. "Bill Roberts shore buttonholed him!"

Ware stripped back the shirt from the fellow's chest, stared for a moment at the gaping hole that welled blood, then rose. "Nothin' to do for him," he shrugged. "Yo' man Roberts shore had a gun that shot where he

held it! Let's go."

"They're headin' for the Three Prod, all right," said Boggs. "Three-four hours ahead, I figger. Now, there's no use our ridin' out there. Let's us cut across an' bushwhack 'em on the trail between the Three Prod an' the Arrowhead!"

Forthwith he whirled his gray due west. They pelted through greasewood and mesquite and cactus for miles. Even the rangebred animals were breathing heavily when at last they came to a trail, fairly well defined, running roughly north and south. There were no traces of the horse band on this trail, and up it toward the Three Prod they rode until they came to the dry bed of an arroyo, across which the trail led.

"We'll wait here!" said Boggs briefly.

The arroyo was nine or ten feet deep. The horses would not be visible to the oncoming thieves until they had ridden down into the very bed of the arroyo. So they swung down and squatted with backs against a wall to smoke and overhaul their weapons and wait. An hour passed draggingly. The sun was sweeping down the horizon toward the jagged blue peaks of the Emigrants. Shadows were lengthening. Frequently one or the other rose and lifted his bare head cautiously above the arroyo rim.

It was Boggs who, getting up to take a look, turned with grimly tightened mouth. "Comin'," he grunted. "Ready? Well, young fella, there's goin' to be some powder burned in a little. If—if it turns out that-a-way, why—so long."

Ware looked. Perhaps a mile to the northeast a cloud of dust was rising slowly billowing up from the trail. He glanced calculating at the arroyo walls and nodded to himself. "Let's git abo'd," he suggested. "Reckon yuh'll have to kind o' scrooch down, Boggs, else yuh'll stick up over the aidge an' they c'n see yuh."

The pound of hoofs sounded louder and louder, a muffled drumming. Boggs on one side, Ware on the other, of the trail, hugging close to the wall, they watched and waited tensely.

A lithe youngster of daredevil face popped down into the arroyo between them. Behind him came the van of stolen horses from the Three Prod and Lazy D. He shifted in the saddle, this one who rode point. As he turned, the loop of Ware's rope settled about his neck. He came from the saddle like a frog, with arms and legs waving wildly, a cry of alarm choking hoarsely in his throat.

The horse band milled for an instant; then shrill yells from the thieves behind drove them on and they shot up the far side of the arroyo. The fellow whom Ware had roped came with a jerking of the rawhide lariat almost under the hoofs of Ware's bay. He struck squarely upon his head and lay still.

Ware stared down at him for an instant; then the sight of the unnaturally twisted head told him that this one's days of riding were over for always.

In the midst of the column of horses now appeared another of the thieves, a tall, thin man wearing his left arm in a sling improvised from his neckerchief. He was staring sideways as he entered the arroyo, so he looked straight into the eyes of Boggs. He yelled shrilly and his hand flashed to his hip. Boggs drove an accurate bullet through his face and the next in-

stand he was on the ground, under the feet of the herd.

Then both Boggs and Ware urged their mounts against the stream of horses pouring down into the arroyo. They feared that the man's yell and the sound of the shot had alarmed the other thieves. It took a minute or two—first to check the horses, then to push their way through them. When they reached the arroyo rim they found their fears were justified.

Two horsemen were 400 or 500 yards away, racing toward the distant Scalp Creek. The rider in the van was obviously Curly, for he bestrode Rocket, Ware's black stallion. The other, by a process of elimination, must be Skeets Winder.

The pursuers had the advantage of fresher horses—fresher for the hour's rest in the arroyo's bed. They sped after the thieves and very slowly cut down the other's lead. But cut it down they did, though still there was no possibility of shooting at them with any chance of accuracy.

They saw the horse thieves casting frequent glances at the back trail, over-shoulder or from under their elbows, while inch by inch, almost, they crept upon Curly and Skeets Winder.

But there was the great danger that, if the fugitives could maintain a lead of even a few hundred yards until darkness, in the broken foothills of the Emigrants they might escape. Only the fact that Rocket had traveled that day more miles than the other three horses permitted any of them to keep within sight of him now.

But now Skeets Winder's mount began to lag; he was limping slightly. He was perhaps 50 yards behind Curly. He yelled shrilly and Curly whirled, involuntarily slackened pace a trifle—enough to let Skeets Winder cut down the lead to 30—20—15 yards.

Curly—poor, dumb Curly about whom hung that aura of insignificance, of futility—was doomed. Skeets Winder's hand leaped up. He fired twice, and again. Curly's body jerked in the saddle as if he had been struck with a club. He fell forward upon the horn.

A hand came up, as if in farewell to the world about him, a lovely land that swept across miles and miles of pungent-smelling greasewood to the narrow stream of Scalp Creek and beyond to the heaved-up foothills of the Emigrants; a land bathed now in the deep yellow sunlight of late afternoon, when already the mountains were taking on the purple haze of evening; a land that was full of peace and the promise of peace, but had no peace for him.

He slipped sideways. The hand clawed at Rocket's mane for an instant; then he was upon the ground and Skeets Winder, spurring alongside Rocket, changed mounts at a gallop, bent low over the saddle horn, and struck home the rowels.

Ware, sliding the bay to a stop, flung himself from the saddle and took two long running steps forward, then halted with rifle held loosely.

He drew two deep, deliberate breaths, then slowly the rifle came up. The first bullet was a clean miss. He shifted aim slightly, then, with the flat, vicious report of the second shot, Skeets Winder came from the saddle as if scooped out by an unseen hand. Rocket trotted on a few steps, then stopped. Ware yelled at him shrilly and Rocket turned with ears

pricked forward. When his master yelled a second time, he came trotting back.

"Funny thing about it," said Ware thoughtfully as they stood staring down into the face of Curly, "is about this-'ere pore nitwit. I figger they left him in town to kind o' ride herd on things. When I walked into the Palace he knowed me for a Ranger. Reckon I got to quit wearin' this Mex' outfit; it's gettin' me too well knowed. But if he hadn't went and lost his head an' stole Rocket, chances are he wouldn't be lyin' here dead an' we wouldn't've cleaned up the Tornillos gang."

"She's shore a hard country on damn fools," nodded Boggs. "Yes, suh! They ride a hard trail."

WITH HIS BOOTS ON

HOLLYWOOD could conceive no more suspenseful a scene than the one which occurred in Pete Maxwell's bedroom on a dark July night in 1881, when for long seconds the lives of Sheriff Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid Bonney hung in the balance.

Garrett, who had been trailing Billy for many weeks following the youthful desperado's daring escape from jail, was convinced that he was hiding out near Fort Sumter, where his popularity was so great that he could probably find shelter in any house in town. The lawman finally decided to talk to Pete Maxwell.

Since it was late at night, Garrett went directly to Maxwell's bedroom, leaving two companions outside. Crouching beside the old rancher's bed, he asked him if Billy had been seen in the neighborhood. Maxwell, after giving some vague answers, admitted that Billy had been around.

Suddenly Garrett saw a figure dimly silhouetted in the doorway, and something held in the newcomer's right hand reflected a gleam of light.

"Pete," the stranger whispered, "who are those men?" He came closer to the bed, almost touching Garrett before he realized that there was someone else in the room. *"Quien es? Quien es?"* he whispered.

"That's him!" Maxwell said hoarsely to Garrett.

The breaks were with Pat Garrett. Knowing the Kid too well to try to make an arrest, he fired abruptly. Gun in hand, Billy the Kid died—died at the age of 21, with 21 killings to his name.

—BOB BEAUGRAND

It having been charged that old Uncle Charlie, the prospector, was loco, the county judge conducted a sanity hearing. At its end, the judge said, "Well, Charlie, I find nothing wrong with your mentality, I'm glad to say."

"Thanks, Jedge," Uncle Charlie replied. "After all, they ain't nothin' queer 'bout a likin' fer flapjacks, is they?"

"Certainly not—why, I'm fond of flapjacks myself!"

"Be you? Then c'mon out to my place in the foothills—I got a couple o' 'bandoned mines dang nigh filled with 'em!"

If You Don't Get Excited—

By EDWIN CORLE

BANNING *has a right to feel satisfied with his flawless capture of the red diamond rattler, executing each detail of the operation perfectly. Then he makes a harmless, if foolish, mistake by leaving his forked stick where he drops it. A second mistake, however, is not so harmless —he puts his hand where it should never be put. Then comes his third one—like a fool, a rank amateur, he gets excited—*

THE forked stick dropped deftly over the snake's body just back of the head. The reptile was effectively pinned to the sandy bottom of the dry wash. Banning, holding the stick, looked down in concentrated admiration at the prize. The snake, a red diamond rattler, indigenous to the Colorado Desert of southeastern California, about five feet in length or perhaps a few inches short of that mark, seemed stunned, unable to comprehend a new experience. It made no violent movements at all and showed no special fear, and only a slight waving of the tail and a rapid shooting in and out of its blue-black tongue evinced its dull but mounting anger.

Banning congratulated himself on

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his skill. The snake itself couldn't have struck with more accuracy than he had done in capturing it, and moreover, the stick apparently had in no way injured it.

"Hello, baby," Banning said aloud, maintaining his grip on the stick to keep the reptile down firmly, but taking care not to exert too great pressure on the back of its neck. He bent forward.

It was truly a beautiful specimen —a rusty red, with the diamond markings in deeper red, thinly outlined in flat white. The head was darker red than the body, looking triangular from above with the poison pouches plainly visible on each side. The brown eyes stared unknowingly, uncomprehendingly, into space. The tail, about six inches in length, was white, with four black rings ending in nine rattles.

"You're a sweet baby," Banning said, holding the stick with his left hand and opening the sack with his right. Watching the head of the snake and shaping the mouth of the sack into a wide crater, which, from long experience, he could have done in the dark or if he were blind, he let it remain in readiness on the sandy wash within a foot of the snake. His last groping precaution was to feel for the drawstring which he would yank, once the snake's body was within the crater of the waiting sack. The string was there.

Still keeping a firm grip, he let his right hand descend to a point on the red body just back of the forks of the stick. This was the moment. Excitement now would bungle the whole job. He even went over in his mind the details of the operation so that it could be executed quickly, harmlessly, and without a wasted motion: his feet well braced, with the left forward and the right to the rear (for if you are off balance you are only handicapping yourself), thumb and forefinger on each side of the reptile's neck up close to its head, the sack only inches away on his right side. All was perfect.

With a rhythmic gesture he raised the forked stick and tossed it aside, at the same time increasing the pressure of his thumb and forefinger; and lifting the reptile head first into the air, he swung it to the right until the tail was over the crater. This is the instant when an amateur is impelled to drop the prize into the sack, and that's the usual mistake. Banning never relaxed his grip on the neck, but lowered his hand straight down so that the five feet of red body went tail first into the crater and immediately began to coil as it felt the solid foundation beneath. When the head was but a few inches above the rest of the body, and with his own body directly in back of the direction in which the head was pointed, he released the thumb and forefinger grip and with his left hand grasped the drawstring. Giving the string a quick jerk upward brought the sack up vertically around the snake and at the same time pulled the crater together. In an instant the snake had disappeared within.

"Couldn't be better, baby," Banning said aloud.

This was too good to keep to himself. He wouldn't hunt any farther. It was at least a mile and a half,

perhaps two, back to the car, and he and Mr. Diamondback would start at once. Parker and Knapp might not be back yet, but he could get Mr. Snake safely ensconced in the station wagon and wait with pleasant anticipation until they returned—empty-handed, too, he half hoped. But that was unfair. He should really wish them all the luck that he had just had.

Fondly he looked at the sack. There were slight undulations in its sides as the reptile moved within. This was really great. Probably the best Parker and Knapp would have would be some nasty little sidewinder — poisonous little devil, lacking the grandeur of this creature. He had never seen a red diamond rattler quite as long as this one. Four feet was a good length, but this must be very close to five.

"Now we take a walk," he said aloud. He picked up the sack by the end of the drawstring with his right hand and started down the wash. Then, just in time, he snapped the fingers of his left hand.

"Stupid!"

He turned back. He had made his first mistake. It was a bonehead trick typical of the amateur. He had been collecting snakes for five years, and never before had he started off and left his stick where it had been tossed—like the motorist who repairs a flat tire and then drives off and leaves his tool by the roadside. There was the stick. Wouldn't that have been a dumb trick, to go all the way back to the car and forget the stick? They'd have kidded him for that. But then, would either of them have a red diamond?

"All right, baby, now we're off."

It was about a mile down the wash, easy walking but a little sandy, through the dwarfed smoke trees that looked purplish until you got close to them, to the point where the wash curved to the left. He couldn't miss it, for not only was the curve a landmark, but there were two naked palo verde trees on the bank at that spot. Also there were his own tracks, which he could retrace. He wondered why there wasn't an English name for *palo verde*. In translation it simply meant "green tree." Well, they were green, all right, even to the bark.

Then, when he reached the palo verde trees, he would have another mile across the alluvial fan from the mountains to the next wash, where they had left the station wagon. They had driven up that wash from the highway four miles below, until the sand made it hazardous, and they had left the car and gone out alone on foot from there. At least, Banning had gone alone, but Parker and Knapp were probably hunting together. Parker, after all, had done this only twice before. Amateur.

And you can't tell; Banning himself might run across something even on this trip back. Luck runs like that.

He plodded on, his heavy laced boots scuffing the sand and the sack swinging at his side. "Say, baby, you're no lightweight" — he shifted the sack to his left hand—"are you, sweetheart?" He wondered about the sex—well, plenty of time to find that out later. He certainly didn't intend to open that sack now.

The bottom of the wash was about

six feet lower than the sloping fan through which the wash itself had cut. Back of him lay the Santa Rosa Range, from a canyon of which the dry wash began. Ahead lay the Coachella Valley, the northwestern arm of the Colorado Desert, and across the valley were the painted Mecca Hills. From his present position on the floor of the wash it was impossible to see much of anything over the water-eroded walls except the tops of distant blue mountains.

He had been away from the car about an hour when he came upon the rattler gliding across the sand. It was late afternoon, or he would never have had such luck. As a general rule the snakes of the desert country are quiescent during the heat of the day, for the hot sand burns their bellies. Banning and Parker and Knapp had agreed on a three- to four-hour trip, from four in the afternoon until seven or eight in the evening, since that is the time of day when the reptiles begin to forage. Banning reasoned that Parker might tire first; he and Knapp should be back at the car by six o'clock or thereabouts. It was now five o'clock, and he still had a mile and a half of desert to cover. He would get to the car ahead of them by a matter of minutes, no doubt. He trudged on, wondering what the technical name of his prize might be. *Crotalus atrox* would include it, but then that included most Western diamondbacks.

"Do you know your name, baby?" he asked, grinning. Then a flash of movement caught his eye on the sand ahead. A lizard had darted out of sight under a small rock.

Banning stopped.

He watched the rock, which was about the size of a watermelon and similarly shaped. No scooting shadow emerged. The lizard had sought safety somewhere underneath. He put down the sack and advanced to the rock. He might as well have this, too. In the split second of visible movement he had not been able to discern what species it was. It might have been a speckled gecko. But whatever it was, it was definitely not a Gila monster, which is the only poisonous lizard in the American deserts, and by a quick overturn of the rock it was quite possible that he could catch it in his hands. When the rock was disturbed the creature would flee for the next nearest shelter.

Looking around, Banning saw another rock a dozen feet away. In panic the lizard would dart for that objective, and knowing its probably direction, Banning could almost count on its capture. He would tell Parker and Knapp that the lizard was his only prize—and when they hooted at it he would show them the diamondback. He prepared to overturn the rock by a push downhill with his left hand, and he went down on one knee and braced himself with the palm of his right hand on the warm sand.

Then he heard the rattle.

It was a faint, dry, rapid *chick-chick-chick-chick-chick-chick*, and for an instant he hesitated with his left hand about to push the rock. His first thought was that the rattle came from the red diamondback inside the sack. He turned to look at the sack and immediately felt the impact of

lancelike fangs on his right wrist.

He started back, jumping to his feet. A sidewinder was quickly recoiling from its attack. Banning, his concentration on the rock, had put his right hand down on sand under which a sidewinder had burrowed from the heat of the sun.

Both man and reptile were ready for battle. Both were enraged, Banning, if possible, more so than the snake. The little horned rattler, only about a foot in length, was coiling into a loop.

Banning was outraged. His instinct was to kill it. He kicked a heavy boot at its head, missing it as the reptile looped away down the wash with the peculiar side-thrusting S-like motion from which it derives its popular name.

"God damn you!" he said through gritted teeth, plunging after it, stooping for a small rock to hurl at its head. He threw the rock and missed. "Why, you God-damned little—" he began, and then he remembered the wound. He looked at his wrist. Two drops of blood were welling larger and running down into the palm of his hand.

Banning stopped and wiped away the blood. There was no great feeling of pain. It was a scratch, he told himself—nothing more. And at once he knew better. The fangs had punctured a vein. There was no use in trying to kid himself. The little jets of poison had been shot straight into his bloodstream. And he, like a fool, like a rank amateur in herpetology, had got furious with the snake.

He looked around.

The sand-colored sidewinder was gone. The sack with the red diamond rattler lay where he had left it. All was safe there. And the rock with the lizard under it was still there. The lizard may have scooted in the excitement—let him go—Banning had no further interest in the lizard, the unwitting cause of this accident. He looked at his wrist. Idiot that he had been, wasting precious seconds trying to kill the sidewinder while its poison coursed through his system. And he had even expended energy in pursuing the snake and hurling rocks at it, increasing his heart action so that the poison virus was forced more rapidly through his veins than it would normally have flowed. Fool—fool.

Now the thing to do was to calm down. Take it easy. Men have been bitten before—by devilish little sidewinders, too. He had a first-aid kit for such an emergency. Now use it—don't hurry or get excited—but simply make practical use of it.

He unstrapped the kit from his belt, and he saw that his hands were trembling. Five years and never an accident—well, it's got to happen sometime—or so they say. "Why in the hell didn't I think of sidewinders' hiding in the cooler sand just beneath the surface of dry washes? I know that as well as I know my name."

Banning opened the first-aid kit, instinctively using his left hand and saving his right. Perhaps he imagined it, but it seemed that his right hand felt numb. The first article of equipment that he selected was a ligature for the forearm. This he applied, forcing the tourniquet as tight as possible. He cursed himself for not having done this instantly. It might have prevented most of the poison from being carried to the heart by the blood. But

at least he had, perhaps, localized some of it.

Then he examined the two fang punctures. With a small scalpel he made crosscuts over each; then he inserted the tip of the blade into the wounds, slightly deeper than the fangs had penetrated. Having thus enlarged the punctures by sacrification, he sucked hard on the wound, spitting out the blood and saliva onto the sandy wash. He did this intensively for several minutes. Next came an application of a solution of permanganate of potash. With the wound thoroughly saturated, an antiseptic bandage finished the treatment. He felt he had done an efficient job—once he had started it.

Now to get back to the car before there was any more trouble. He picked up the sack this time without speaking aloud to the rattler within, found the forked stick, and marched on. The thing to do now was to keep calm. No excitement, no running, just a steady, determined pace that he could maintain for hours if necessary. And he was now only a little more than a mile from the car and from Parker and Knapp—if they were back yet.

Banning trudged on down the wash, carrying the sacked red diamond rattler with his left hand and the forked stick with his right. The ligature was effective, no doubt, for his hand, wrist, and forearm were very numb. The numbness was due to the ligature. Mustn't forget that.

It seemed that he must surely be at the point where the wash curved to the left and where the two palo verde trees stood. But no—not yet—and there was no mistake about it, because ahead were the tracks he had made as he ascended the wash only half an hour or so ago.

He dropped the forked stick.

He hadn't felt it slip from his grasp. But suddenly it was on the ground. All feeling was gone from his right hand. When he put down the sack and retrieved the stick with his left hand, the whole right arm felt heavy. It wanted to hang lifeless from the shoulder down. He couldn't make his fingers grasp the forked stick. The fingers were swelling slightly. And as for the wrist, that had swollen considerably. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and swung his canteen from his left shoulder. A draft of cooling water would help. He took several long swallows. It wasn't very cool, but it was welcome. He had three more, then capped it, and swung it into position over his shoulder again. His left arm was tired from the weight of the diamondback, but there was no relief for it, as his right arm was now useless. It was the ligature doing that, of course. Nothing to be alarmed about. . . . Breathing deep, he tucked the forked stick under his left elbow and picked up the sack with his left hand and marched on.

The sand made speed impossible. But then he must remember that there was no reason for speed. He wasn't trying to hurry; he must always remember that—don't get excited and you'll be all right. But where the devil was that bend and the two palo verde trees?

And why might there not be more sidewinders in this wash? No doubt there were. It didn't matter. No sidewinder or no anything else could strike through a heavy pair of boots such as he wore. He was amply protected up to the knees. But if he saw

another sidewinder he'd kick its damned head off and—no—no, that wasn't it. Never get mad at the snake. He had simply been a fool and begged for trouble by kneeling in a sandy wash and not watching where he put his hand. Damn that lizard, anyway —no, never get mad at the snake. But lizards aren't snakes. You can get mad at lizards without breaking the rule. So damn the lizard that had caused all this. Was he being silly? Well—be silly, then.

Whew—the red diamondback weighed 50 pounds—or so it felt when you carried it down a desert wash in a hot sun. Now where were his tracks? Must have rambled to one side somewhere—let's see—there—there they are. We'll go on to those two palo verde trees and then have another drink.

And there they were. God bless 'em —there they were. And there's where the wash curved to the left. Now we climb the bank up onto the harder ground and cut straight across to the next wash. One mile more, and there we are.

Climbing the six feet of shaly bank was not easy. His whole right arm throbbed from the shoulder to the tips of his fingers. Twice he slipped and almost tumbled. And a tumble might injure the red diamondback. Contrary to popular belief, snakes are easily injured. The very nature of their bodies leaves them highly vulnerable. Should he drop the sack and inadvertently give Mr. Rattler a bump on the head, it might even kill him. And that would be a shame after all this effort. Nothing was going to hurt that snake. That was final. . . . Now let's see how we are going to do this.

Banning stood still and inhaled deeply three times to break the rhythm of his panting, almost gasping, breath. He moved to the bank and took two unsteady steps up and swung the sack above like a man swinging a satchel into an overhead baggage rack in a day coach. It rested on the brink. So Mr. Diamondback was safe. He may not like it in there, but he's safe.

Now all Banning had to do was scramble up himself. Then he realized that the forked stick was gone again. It must have dropped out from under his left arm somewhere back up the wash. Too bad. He wasn't going back for it now. Quarter of six, with the sun still an hour above the horizon. He *could* go back and find that stick, after all. No—not worth it, but you just hate like hell to let it get away from you. He knew approximately where it must be; he could go back for it tomorrow, or any day.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and again tried to scale the bank. There was nothing to stop him from scrambling up its unsure footing except his aching right arm, which was rapidly becoming an agony to him. It's that damned ligature that's doing it. Not the wound. Not the wound? Certainly not!

He was making it now, the shale sliding out from under him as he clawed for a root or a rock with his left hand, missed, and helplessly slid down to the sandy bottom again, scratching his left arm and tearing a button off his shirt. Now who would think that a little climb of six feet could be so difficult?

He looked at the rock critically. *I know what that is*, he thought. *Why*

can't I get over it? What he needed was more water. He had planned to drink when he reached the top of the bank, where Mr. Rattler was waiting peacefully in his sack. But if he rested for only a few seconds and had a drink, he could doubtless take the bank with a leap or two. He unscrewed the cap of the canteen and said to the bank, "You are a fissile argillaceous rock, somewhat resembling poor slate, and you're not worth a God damn."

He drank.

"Geologically, you stink," he said to the bank. And he drank more water, tipping the canteen high above his head. "About three quarters gone," he reasoned, "Save the rest until halfway across this desert fan to the car in the next wash. That's what."

Back on the canteen went the cap. Instead of clawing helplessly at the bank in order to ascend at this spot, he backed away from it, looking up and down the wash for any small side wash that might afford an easier, gradual ascent. There seemed to be none at this point; the bank looked much the same in either direction. *Might as well fight it out on this line if it takes all summer,* he thought. Now who said that? Somebody. Civil War, maybe. And whenever he thought of that quotation he always thought of another. *I would rather be right than be president.* Henry Clay said that one. *Well, here goes.*—

He walked to the bank and looked for the most likely footing and dug his boots into the shale and scrambled up and hung on with his good left arm, sweating, straining, pulling, gasping, until he got his waist over the edge and then one knee and at last crawled a couple of feet from the edge and lay panting for breath. It wasn't the lack of breath that was so bad; it was the pain in his right arm that was almost too much to bear. The final exertion of that six feet of clawing and climbing was concentrated in the arm, which hadn't done any of the pulling, but only had been bumped a few times.

He lay face down on the desert soil and felt a surge of nausea and a throbbing at the back of his head with each pulse. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he vomited the water he had recently consumed down in the dry wash.

Slowly he rolled over on his left side and sat up, avoiding cholla cactus and bull's-tongue and rolling toward the scant shade of the nearer of the two bony palo verdes. He exhaled mightily, really a sigh, and then listened. There wasn't another sound in the desert except his own breathing. Beside him were several brown, angular stalks of bottleweed, and beyond them some bladder sage, and farther still some scabiosa sage. He looked at these desert plants blankly, and said finally, "Whew—Jesus H. God."

Even that exertion seemed to run like an electric shock from shoulder to fingertips, and for the first time in many minutes he examined his arm again. There was no wrist. There was a dark, ugly, swollen, discolored hand swelling to a larger, unrecognizable mass that had been forearm. The pain was so great that there was no enduring it any longer. It was that God-damned ligature that had done its work and done it too well. He could never suffer this for another mile across the desert to the next wash and the relief of seeing that

car—and Parker and Knapp. The ligature must certainly have served its purpose by now if it was going to at all—either it had prevented the spread of the poison or it had not. In either case, off with it.

Then he found that he couldn't get it off. It had been perfectly secured a half a mile or so back up that damned wash, and it just didn't seem possible to—well, hell, *cut* it off! Get it off somehow. And get it off quick, for God's—no, no—don't get excited. Just don't get excited, but use your head, and you'll be all right.

He fumbled for the first-aid kit—found it—opened it—and searched for the scalpel. Now where was *that?* Hadn't left *that* somewhere back in that wash, had he? Great God, if he were as batty as that over a little thing like this, why, he must be—No, here it is.

He placed the sharp instrument on the bandage and began to cut into it before he realized that it wasn't the bandage he wanted to cut, but the ligature. On the throbbing, beating arm they were both alike; he had no sensation of either. It was the whole arm that was on fire. Four careful slices with the scalpel, and the ligature was released. It slipped to the ground, and Banning lay back under the palo verde and gritted his teeth while the clotted blood broke free and flowed through the arm.

As he looked up he could see one or two green palo verde branches and pale blue sky. He decided to rest like this for a few minutes and give the blood a chance to circulate.

A man's chances of being bitten by a snake are not more than ten percent, he reviewed in his mind. One chance in ten, call it; and then of all the snakes that may bite, only about one in five of those in the desert are poisonous. So you might carelessly pick up 50 different snakes without even looking at them and your margin of risk was only one in 50, or two percent. So it's not such a dangerous affair after all. Five years in it and never a scratch—up until today, when he had become careless over his glorious red diamondback and invited trouble from the meanest little snake in America—*Crotalus cerastes* was his name—he had an armful of him right now.

Why couldn't he have put his hand down where a red racer lay hidden—or a nice friendly gopher snake? Why had he had to hit the two percent margin at last and the fangs of the most vicious little varmint that bred in the desert? Sidewinders were the Apaches of the snake family. He had had a red racer sleep on his desk all afternoon—many afternoons, and it was one of the nicest, cleanest, friendliest pets you'd ever want to see. He had a gopher snake named Ludwig which liked to be read to, and a beautiful milk snake which enjoyed Beethoven. People laughed at that, but it was absolutely true. But then few people (considerably less than one in 100, in fact) understood the first thing about snakes. Most people had an instinctive horror of them—a fear born of ignorance. To them all snakes were evil and should be killed on sight. Damn fools!

And most of all he hated silly women who screamed and ran whenever they saw a snake. That was the nadir of something or other. Why, only touch a snake—any snake—once, just one touch, and instantly you lose all fear and horror. They're not slimy,

they're not repellent. They're cleaner than dogs or cats, they never have parasites, they exterminate rodents, and if you will only let your mind admit it, nearly all of them are beautiful, and many of them gorgeous. And what's more, they don't crawl—they take steps; only instead of having two or four feet they have scores of plates which do exactly the same thing that a foot does. People are such damned fools.

A snake's progression over ground is a beautiful synthesis of correlated rhythms. If only Banning himself had a few thousand plates on his belly he could move on to the car without each step being a throbbing agony.

Now how was that arm? Bad. Just plain bad. And it was time to start moving—he could make it after that rest, surely.

Banning got to his feet. For a moment he was dizzy, and he couldn't see anything but revolving black spots, and there was a ringing in his ears. Then he saw the sandy wash six feet below. A few steps away was the sack containing his prize; he walked uncertainly to it, picked it up, and started across the desert.

The next hundred yards were an agony, and as for the distance yet to go, he tried not to think of it. He clenched his teeth and vowed he'd make it. Slowly—slowly—if you don't get excited you'll be all right. He stumbled on, counting his steps in series up to twenty, and then starting over—it gave his mind something to do. When he had counted to twenty four or five times, red racers were fighting sidewinders, and a great lazy boa encircled half a dozen sidewinders and constricted them all at once. A little garter snake, like laughter, was holding both his sides.

Banning caught his breath and shook his head. *I don't know,* he thought. *Maybe not.* It wasn't the pain any more; it was drowsiness now. It was all a confusion that somehow wasn't worth the exertion. And yet, somehow, he was still walking, and the sun was sinking, and he could tell by the shadows of the cholla cactus that he was still stumbling on in the right direction.

He felt for the canteen, but it had slipped from his shoulder. But that was all right. It wasn't lack of water that was dangerous; it was lack of mental control. He was attacked by more vicious enemies than thirst. He was waging a single-handed war against sand, rocks, cactus, heat, fear, and time.

It was all those allies of the venom and the wound that were making a real fight of it. His mind was now his last defense. . . . If that goes, the others have got me. But you must remember not to be afraid. Fear of fear is the worst weakness of all. Don't be afraid you won't make it. Just count the steps again and keep on going, and surely Parker and Knapp will be back now. It must be all of 6:30 by this time. That sun is going down.

Stumbling on, trying to keep the sack from being jostled too severely, Banning made the mile between the two dry washes. The one in which the car had been left had more gradual banks. There would be no troublesome descent. He reached the point where the cholla cactus gave way to sand verbena and desert mallow, and there was the wash where they had parked the station wagon earlier in the afternoon. Only one thing was

wrong. The car was gone.

Banning stumbled down into the wash. He put the sack on the ground and looked around. Had he misjudged the wash? Was he too far north or south? No—those marks were tire tracks. And a dozen yards away a few blobs of black grease on the sand showed plainly that the car had stood for some time at that spot. But it had been backed around and driven away down the wash. The tracks showed that, too.

Why?

Banning went over to the sack and sat down beside it. This was the last ally of the venom. This was the last unexpected little joker that meant the game. He had done everything he could be expected to do. If the car didn't come back—well, that was that. He lay back slowly, his left hand near the sack. He wouldn't think any more.

His hand touched the sack, and within the reptile squirmed. Banning moved. There was one thing more he wanted to do—just one final thing. He fumbled with the drawstring of the sack. He couldn't do anything with it. There was that scalpel. He fumbled in the first-aid kit again and found it. Then he cut the drawstring and pulled open the mouth of the sack.

"Come on," he whispered. "It's your game. You won."

He lay quietly beside the sack, his head but a few feet away as the red diamondback rattlesnake emerged. It was utterly confused and very frightened. It didn't rattle; it didn't even coil. It crawled hastily out of the sack on the opposite side from Banning.

"Don't mind, baby," Banning whispered. "Don't be scared. You're free. Go on."

Quickly the rattlesnake crossed the wash to the far side and in the half-light disappeared into the desert.

The twilight was deepening when a pair of headlights bounced crazily up the wash. The car, laboring in second gear, came on until the lights picked up Banning and the empty sack beside him. Parker and Knapp were out of the car in a second.

Knapp read the story almost at once—only the empty sack mystified him. He could feel Banning's pulse, but he could not rouse him. He ordered Parker to turn the car around and get set for a dash to the highway. Wait—there was something in the car to be tried as an emergency treatment. He had never had occasion to use it, but this, surely, was the time. It consisted of a hypodermic injection of subbichlorate of potassium.

"It's been said," he told Parker, "on no authority at all, that this is a sure antidote for any snake venom."

He made the injection.

"But is it?" asked Parker. They were lifting Banning into the station wagon.

"We'll damned soon know," said Knapp. "You drive down to the highway and then let 'er rip for the emergency hospital at Indio. You ought to do it under forty minutes. I'd say he's got a little better than a fifty-fifty chance. It couldn't have been over two hours ago. But why did he put that empty sack there? Must have gone nuts. Step on it. What do we care if we break a spring or two?"

The station wagon careened wildly down the wash, its lights cutting into the spreading darkness.

TAMARISK seems to have been a good-enough place to locate a town. Then an Easterner with big ideas starts his own town on the other side of the rise. Fellows, who runs a livery stable in Tamarisk, is unperturbed until the Easterner strikes water in Well City. That's something else again—or so it seems until old Pericles, who makes the slumgullion that "wallops you hot and smooths you off easy," clambers aboard his flea-bitten mare to ride off on a little scouting expedition. This story was written especially for ZGWM.

WELL SPICED

By THEODORE STURGEON

TAMARISK just happened. Some forgotten Conestoga cap'n had chosen the Tamarisk hollow as a route down the Valley, rather than the exactly similar hollow on the other side of the rise. The town's first building appeared when one Pericles Zapappas sold the oxen which hauled his chuck wagon. The old wagon, hub-deep in the sandy soil, was the nucleus. Because it was there, it was logical to set up a general supplies shack near it, and because of the shack and its increasing stock, settlers took to the nearby lush foothills, knowing they had a trading place. With the settlers came the helpers and the hangers-on, the blacksmith and the gamblers, the assay office and the livery stable and the hotel.

Pericles Zapappas stuck with Tamarisk. He hadn't planned to; he hadn't planned not to. It was just that there were so many people to feed—and he liked feeding people. He liked to see the tin plates, and later, the thick china ones, mopped clean with great chunks of sourdough bread, or the muscular black loaves he baked himself. The old wagon soon sported a canvas awning which became a mess tent which gradually acquired wooden walls and a tin roof, and as the busy years and the busy wagon trains passed, there was a new building with a real kitchen, rows of iron skillets, three glass sugar bowls, and a spittoon.

Pericles was the only fixture that showed no change. He was a grizzled, tubby little man, with a com-

plexion the color of a frankfurter and a skin like a silk pillow slip that has been slept on for three hot nights. His eyes were round, clear, and blue, giving the impression of red-hot portholes into an ice box. He smiled often, never laughed, and was always a little frightened —afraid that the meat wouldn't arrive, that the coffee would boil, that a customer wasn't getting enough to eat. He absorbed insults and compliments with the same gentle smile and the same shuffling backward retreat, as from royalty.

Tamarisk was good to live in, as such places go, when the wind was from the hills. But when it came panting up from the desert with fire and salt on its breath, the town shimmered and crackled and dried in it. It was on such a day that Fellows stamped into Pericles's place, and the youth's language was not one whit less blistering than the desert wind. His profanity swirled in, all but sweeping Pericles off his precarious perch on a serving-table, where he was hanging mesh bags of garlic, strings of melon rind, and chains of herbs and barks to dry; for Pericles was a great hand in the spice department.

"Feed me!" roared Fellows. "By God, likker won't do fer this. Gimme some o' that slumgullion of yours, the kind that wallops you hot an' then smooths you off easy."

Pericles climbed down and framed the kid in his round blue stare. "Hey boy. Whatsa do — burn down you stable?"

"It's thet money-jinglin' Eastern toad, Barstow," spat the youngster. "Him an' his gunmen an' his 'fer th' good of th' country'!"

"Meest' Barstow is crazy," said Pericles mildly. "Tamarisk is a plenty big town for the Valley. Whats 'e wan' for to make a new one?"

Fellows folded himself into a creaky chair, knocking his holster clear so that it swung as he sat. "Jest why he's doin' it don't worry me right now. It's whut he's doin'. You know what he done? He started a livery stable over there. He ain't got but four hosses, an' nothing but a drunked-up ol' prospector to care for'm. But he's *givin'* 'em away! I can't charge a ranny prices like thet! Feed costs me, Peri, thet an' a hand to guard the place at night, what with hoss thieves an' fire an' all."

Pericles, well within earshot, stirred his spices into the witches' brew he called slumgullion. "Meest' Barstow dig a well," he called.

"Yeh. I heerd about thet. Whut's he aim to git from it — tamarisk roots?"

Pericles, tipping some of the precious fluid from a carboy mounted on a pivoted frame, grunted, "Water, Fellows. He got it, also."

"You mean to tell me he struck water over there?"

"He got town well. Cab Jenks, this man with piebal' gelding, he come tell me this morning."

"Oh," said Fellows, and it was an eloquent syllable. There was a recess for thinking, and then he said, "Peri, if he's got water, it ain't no good for Tamarisk."

"Yes," said Pericles. "No good."

"What's Tamarisk?" Fellows burst out after a troubled silence. "So

many shacks, so many people—what the hell. Let it go. It might's well be a ghost town, like Harriston or DuMoulin's Gulch."

"Yes," said Pericles, coming around the partition with a deep, steaming bowl of stew. "But—we build Tamarisk. You, you stable. Me, my place. Gomez an' he saddles. Trask an' he cotton goods. Rogers an' Hark an' that ol' fella Mickey Mack. Hm?"

"Yeh, Peri—but a *well!* We ain't got no well. We dug for'm twice, an' you know what we got. Sweat, not water. We got to haul water a mile and a half from Feegan's Brook." He dug into the stew as if he hated it, which he did not. "How'd he know he'd strike water there?" he demanded with his mouth full. "Builds six shacks," he growled—quite an achievement through that much stew, "an' suddenly hits water in country where they ain't a water hole in ten miles, 'cept where the desert drinks up Feegan's Brook."

"Whats about the spring, Fellows?"

"Spring? Oh—thet. Yeah. Four miles over the other way. Whyn't he build his town over by there, if he had to build a town?"

Pericles smiled—the smile he used instead of a laugh. "Spring in the cliff. What trade he get by there? Bighorns? Rock squirrels?"

"I see what you mean. His place and Tamarisk sit smack in the middle of the only two trade routes through here. Aw, mebbe you're right, Peri. Maybe he's jest crazy."

"Ask him," said Pericles, in a slightly awed voice.

"Huh?" Fellows's startled eyes swung from the Greek around to the door, which was being blocked at the moment by several cubic feet of flabby flesh, girdled by a too-new cartridge belt and topped with a city-made Stetson. "Barstow!"

"Good morning, good morning," said the heavy man, laughing what had been described as a diddling laugh, "and how are the thriving burghers of Tamarisk today?"

Fellows put down his spoon and hooked his thumbs in his belt, the fingers of his left hand sliding down to check the gentle swinging of his holster. His eyes were like cracks in a board as he took the Easterner's measure.

Barstow looked him up and down and turned a broad and insulting back. "Mr. Zapappas," he said unctuously. "Ahh. You're looking well this morning. How's business?"

Pericles sidled behind a counter. He regarded Barstow without his smile. "Business always good."

"Splendid, splendid," said Barstow heartily. "Glad to hear it. Make the best of it while it lasts, I always say." Then there was that laugh again. Suddenly he turned to Fellows—so suddenly that the youngster dropped his spoon and cursed viciously. "And how is the livery business?"

"Good, no thanks to you," snarled Fellows.

"Hey, Fellows, makes no trouble in my place, huh?"

Barstow tittered. "There won't be any trouble, Mr. Zapappas," he said. "Mr. Fellows is not familiar with—ah—modern business methods. Now, if he would like to take over my stable, perhaps—"

"I'd jest as soon go back to ridin'

fence," said Fellows evenly.

"That's good! Ha ha! that's very good. Young man, by the time Tamarisk is a ghost city, I'll own all the fences hereabouts, and you'll have to travel many a dry mile before you can hire out without my permission. Ha ha! Better come in with me while you can. I could use a good—"

"Y' won't use me," snapped Fellows.

Barstow shrugged, as if the movement were sufficient to send Fellows into limbo and beyond, and turned back to the Greek. "It so happens, Mr. Zapappas, that there is no eating place in Well City at the moment."

"Whats you say, Well City?"

"Ah, yes, yes indeed. Well City it is, and Well City it will be. Ha! The very name shows that it has a future. Tamarisk! That's all anyone could expect to find here—desert greens. Now, in Well City, there's water—good, pure water."

"I heard," said Fellows, looking out at the rolling desert and its clumps of tamarisk.

Barstow ignored him, to hang his belly on the edge of the counter. "Now, Mr. Zapappas—surely we can come to some agreement on a catering-establishment in Well City."

Pericles shook his head with such timidity that the gesture was a mere quiver of wattles.

"Now, now," said Barstow heartily, "at least come over to look us over. Well City's going to be a great little place. I'm wrong. Well City *is* a great little place. A foresighted businessman—"

"Ef it's so nice yonder," drawled Fellows, "why don't you go on back to it?"

Pericles recognized the tone. It reminded him vividly of his dislike of the smell of gun smoke indoors and its attendant corpses. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again and said, "Sure. Sure, Meest' Barstow. Tomorrow."

Barstow brought his hands together with a meaty crash and scrubbed them happily against each other. "Splendid, Mr. Zapappas. Splendid. You shall have the—ha!—keys to the city. A good day to you, sir." He strode to the door, turned and stared coldly at Fellows. "As for you, young man, it will pay you to remember that the law is loaded heavier than that pop-gun of yours."

Fellows emitted a .45-caliber oath and sprang up, clawing at his hip. Pericles yelped as if burned, and by the time Fellows had looked at him and back to the door, Barstow was gone.

"Peri," said Fellows menacingly, "you are a traitor. You ain't really goin' to go over to thet—Well City tomorrow?"

"I think yes," said Pericles faintly but firmly, his eyes on Fellows's gun hand. "Hey, finish you stew."

"Thet Barstow walked out o' here with my appetite," grumbled the youngster. He threw a leg over his chair and sat down with an elbow on each side of his bowl. The spicy vapors of the stew curled into his angry nostrils, and he began to shovel tentatively, but shoveling, nevertheless. It took three spoonfuls to fill his mouth, whereupon he said, "Whut's this law ol' frog-face is talkin' about?"

Pericles frowned worriedly. "Big talk."

"It's more'n thet," said Fellows grudgingly. "He's mighty cocky to be bluffin'. Y' reckon he's on to somethin' we don't know?"

At last Pericles smiled. "Soon we know," he said. "Tomorrow. Hm?"

Fellows glanced up as the light dawned in his brain. "Peri, you got somethin' up your sleeve, or stuck in your boot. I know you, you greasy ol' son-of-a-gun. Whut you aimin' to do over there tomorrow?"

"Spice a little, stir a lot," said Pericles happily, using his stock answer to questions about his cooking.

It was late the following afternoon that Pericles's flea-bitten mare plodded wearily up to the restaurant. Fellows was standing in the shade, leaning back and whittling. He stepped out and caught the bridle, holding it while the little man dismounted heavily.

"Hot," said Pericles unnecessarily.

"It is thet," said Fellows, throwing the reins over the rail. "Hey, Peri whut's the idea o' them oversize saddlebags? Whut'd you tote over there—a month's grub?"

Pericles ignored the question, mopping his crinkled face. "Well City very busy," he said.

"Is, huh?"

They went inside. "Plenty fellas driving stakes," wheezed the Greek. "Marking streets. Meest' Barstow show me everyt'ing. Place for courthouse, place for smithy, place for hotel and dance hall."

"Holy smoke! What's he think he's doin'?"

Pericles knelt to kindle the stove. "Place for depot too."

"*Depot?* Depot for what? Pony Express?"

Pericles shook his head. "Meest' Barstow, he tells me the big secret. Railroad coming through the Valley."

Fellows, poised over a chair, said "Ah-*hah!*" sitting heavily with the second syllable. "So thet's whut th' horned toad is after. Finds out they're runnin' a railroad survey through here, buys up some desert from the Federal Gov'm'nt, stakes out a town, and sits in it until th' railroad goes through." He clapped his hand to his head and moaned. "An' he has to go and find hisself a well. Hey—Peri! How about thet? D'you see it?"

"I see it. Meest' Barstow, first thing gives me a drink water from it. Pull up the bucket himself. Pour it like he think it's beer. All morning, want me for drink more."

"So he's really got water in his town, huh? Oh, thet ain't good, Peri."

"Not good. Well right in the middle of town."

"Yeah. I c'n see whut's goin' to happen to us an' Tamarisk when Well City gits to be a rail town." He shook his head. "No wonder Barstow took a day showin' you around."

"Not all day. I took a ride," said Pericles cryptically. He went to the door and looked out toward the rise and Well City. "Fellows."

"Huh?"

"You know what? I never learn to load six-gun like yours."

"Well, I'll be— I never knowed you was interested. You don't never carry a gun." His eyes narrowed.

"You expectin' trouble, Peri?"

Pericles shrugged. He looked up at the rise again. There was a feather of dust at its lip. "Show me, Fellows."

"Why shore." Fellows slipped the plated hogleg out of its holster. "Ain't nothin' to it. You pull this back, break it like this, an' jest slip your ca'tridges in these here holes."

"Whats about this thing. What you call? Cylinder?"

"Thet? It spins a little each time you shoot. You know thet."

"Whats if the ca'tridge mash up in there?"

"If it jams? Why, thet's easy enough. With the gun broke like this, the cylinder lifts right out. See? Then you can rod the holes out."

Pericles reached for the cylinder, his bright eyes glinting as his hand closed on it. "I see, Fellows—*look!*"

The youngster followed Pericles's pudgy finger. Down over the rise swept a group of horsemen.

"Wh— Hey, they're from Well City! That's Barstow's crew!" He spun back to the Greek, who had moved behind the partition, where his concoctions were beginning to steam and simmer on the stove. Fellows skidded around the counter and into the rear. "Peri! I don't know how much you know about this, but those guys are loaded for bear. What's goin' on?"

At Fellows's first shout, Pericles had started elaborately, and was now staring dismally into one of the pots. "Hey, boy. You shout too much with you mouth. Now look what happen, I drop you dirty cylinder into my stew."

"You what? Why, you galoot! Thet thing—"

The Well City posse swept past, 30 strong, whooping. There were one or two shots. Fellows cursed, scooped up his gun, and ran for the door. Pericles smiled radiantly, sounded the stew with a wooden spoon, and delicately fished out the cylinder. He carefully washed it and dried it, and put it in the cash drawer.

Twenty minutes later he was busily packing liquor bottles into a crate with straw. There was the rustling beat of hoofs on the hard-packed street, and the posse streamed past, bunched around two riders with dispatch cases.

Fellows pounded in, his face scarlet from the effort to exude profanity and take in air simultaneously. "Peri! Gimme my —— ——— cylinder while I fill their ——— ———s full o' ——— lead!"

"Whatsa do?"

"'Whatsa do?'" screamed Fellows, dancing as if his chaps were full of fire-ants. "Don't ask me questions, damn yuh! I'm mad enough at your clumsiness. You done cass-trated my hawglaig. Now don't make me madder by actin' foolish."

Pericles glanced out at the rise, where the posse was dwindling out of gunshot. He moved to the cash drawer, set the cylinder on the counter, and scrambled in quivering panic away from Fellows's wild dive for it. The kid punched it into his gun, rammed home some shells, and bolted for the door. The sight of the posse pouring over the top of the hill and out of sight deflated him to the point where his shoulders

seemed to dislocate. He went completely limp except for his jaw muscles. He made no sound.

Pericles smiled. "You cuss too much," he observed. "An' when you get real mad, you got not'ing left to say. Hm?"

Fellows turned slowly, slowly raised his fists to his cartridge belt, and treated Pericles to a glare that would have dried up an oat-fed cow with a three-day calf.

Pericles turned pale. "Want a cup coffee?" he murmured.

Fellows ignored the suggestion, while Pericles bustled himself pouring the coffee into a mug. "Peri, you are jest too good-hearted an' stupid to stay alive. Don't you know what them rannies jest did?"

"Whatsa do?"

"I'll tell you 'whatsa do,'" rasped the youngster. "Surrounded the marshal's office, that's what, where ol' Mickey Mack keeps all the town records. They got all them papers and rid off with 'em before anybody in town knew which way to jump." He tapered off to a trickling, inarticulate mumble which returned in another flood of unprintables.

When the noise had died down again, Pericles asked mildly, "Was it legal?"

"Legal? Whaddeya mean legal? It was kidnapin', that's what the hell! Oh, they poked some papers at Mickey Mack fust—"

"What kind papers?"

"I dunno. Mickey tol' us—me and Hark and some more that was there. Somepin' about Well City bein' a county seat, an' a seizure order fer th' county records f'm the marshal's office at Topeka. So what's that?" He snorted. "Them was our records, Tamarisk records—all the deeds an' claims an' transfer notes an' all. What's Well City want with 'em?"

"It was legal," said Pericles quietly. Fellows sat while that sank in. Pericles put coffee before him and said, "It was legal, even if it was no good, boy. Your gun makes big noise, big trouble. Barstow, he say the law is loaded heavier'n you are. Is right."

"Why, you interferin' ol' belly-stuffer!" bawled Fellows. "You spiked my gun thet a way a-purpose!"

"Please," Pericles whispered out of a dry throat. His face was puckered with terror, for Fellows was three degrees uglier than just formidable when his dander soared. "Fellows. Please, boy. Hey. No make trouble in my place. Drink you coffee. You right. Meest' Barstow tell me about this county seat business. Federal judge, he give charter because of well. No use to tell you—you get mad, all you sense run out you mouth, you shoot and then you hang. No good. Well City is county seat. Is legal."

"They cain't do this!" wailed Fellows. "All this country here was settled out o' Tamarisk! Then this Easterner walks off with the rail line an' th' county records and sits down on desert he bought fer nothin' and can sell fer a mint!"

"Is the business methods he talk about."

"It's the business, all right," gritted Fellows, and added something about Barstow that would have been shocking in Greek. Or even in Portuguese.

Fellows slurped broodingly at his coffee. Pericles went back to packing liquor bottles in the crate. At length

Fellows said, "We c'n git up a bigger posse than Barstow."

Pericles froze, half bent over the crate, his shoulders hunched up and his head back as if his nape had been touched by a hot iron. He waited.

"Scoop up our own records, huh?" muttered Fellows inevitably. "Hell, we c'n shoot our way through those shacks of his'n and be gone with th' papers before they know what's up. And it'll take a damn sight more'n twenty armed men an' a coupla court orders to pry us loose, this time."

"Now, Fellows," said Pericles carefully. "Don' talk this kind stuff, you hear? You get troops from Topeka an' a rope for your neck."

"Not me," snarled the youngster. "I'll get lead in my blood, or I'll be over th' border afore that happens."

"Fellows," said Pericles pleadingly, "you can't fight everyt'ing with guns. Yes? Sometimes you got to use somet'ing else."

"Fer the likes o' Barstow? What *you* goin' to do? Use a skillet an' a han'ful o' cayenne? Maybe you want to feed Barstow an' his gunmen ontil they bust, huh?" He regarded the Greek with scorn, which changed to interest as he noticed what Pericles was doing. "What's the idea o' stashing all the firewater?"

"So it not break."

"Break how? You expectin' trouble here?" He leaped to his feet. "Someone pushin' you around, Perl? Who is it? Le's stop it afore it starts. Who do you want hawg-tied an' branded?"

"Shh, boy." Pericles almost laughed. "Don' you worry your head." He took down a hammer and battened the top of the crate. When he had finished he stood up, mopped his face and head, and came around the counter.

"Fellows, listen. You good feller, see? I don' wan' see you in bad trouble. Wait awhile, huh? Don' make this posse stuff. *Please*, Fellows, huh? This Meest' Barstow, he is a hard man. Well City got plenty guards, boy. Rifles. All night, until four o'clock in morning, it gets light a little, Barstow got guards out. You get posse, you get killed. Somebody get killed, anyway. Tamarisk men they get killed. Wait awhile, huh?"

"Wait, hell. Armed guards? This toad wants a war, does he? He's th' one askin' fer it." Fellows scowled; then his head snapped up. "You say he pulls his guards an hour before sunup?"

"Sure. No need them. Men stirrin' about then anyway. But make to forget it, huh, Fellows? You a good boy. Don' get in bad trouble. Don' use you hosses for to make posse."

Having planted his seeds, Pericles bent to the task of sliding the heavy crate around behind the partition. That, oddly enough, placed it by the side door and its loading-stage, against which was backed his battered old buckboard.

Trask, the yard-goods merchant, an ex-sailor and a crack shot, reined in beside the glowering Fellows. Around them jogged the rest of the Tamarisk posse. A crescent moon showed the Well City trail vaguely, and pointed up the twin ruts of a wagon that had passed earlier.

"Hell of a note," grunted Trask.

"Skedaddlin' around this time o' night. I tried to turn in after the meetin' an' didn't know whether I should stay up late or git up early. Turned in an' tried to sleep, still couldn't make up my mind, an' now—" he yawned hugely— "I don't rightly know if I'm awake or not. Way I feel, I wouldn't know silk f'm sailcloth."

"You damn well better be awake when we ride into Well City," said Fellows.

"Now, look, puppy," said the grizzled Trask. "Maybe you set this here forest fire, but just because we think you was right don't say you kin snap an' snarl at yer betters."

"Ah, it's that lousy Zapappas," said Fellows. "All this time claimin' he's a friend o' mine, an' then pullin' a thing like this," and he nodded at the wagon tracks. "What was it you tol' me about rats leavin' a founderin' ship?"

"Don't blame him too much," said Trask. "He's stuck with Tamarisk longer'n any of us an' he rates a break from it. You know what they say about little fat guys. They're all good-natured because they can't fight an' they can't run."

"Thet's all right s'far as it goes," said Fellows. "But he didn't have to tote all thet likker over to Well City to grease his way into their gold mine."

Trask gave a reluctant, affirmative snort. "That was sorta small."

They went through the draw and emerged on a shelf overlooking Well City. There were two guttering fires to be seen north and south of the town, which was dark and still under the bright stars and the weak moonlight. The posse milled together and drew up.

"What time is it?"

"Not four yet."

Whup—whup—whoo-oop!

"What'n blazes was that?"

"A drunken poke if ever I heerd one."

There was a blaze of light in the largest building as the door was flung open, apparently blown by a gust of loose laughter.

"Ev'y man Jack in th' town must be in there gettin' fried," somebody said.

"Yeah, on Zapappas's likker, the skonk," said another.

"Thet's one feller we'll squar' with, whatever."

"I brung a rope."

Somebody cracked a bullwhip. "This is better."

Trask spoke up. "It won't get Tamarisk a thing to stampede that little coyote. Let'm alone. He don't know what he's doin'."

"Feelin' real friendly, ain'tcha?" said an anonymous voice from the rear ranks. "Why don't you go on down and have a drink o' whisky?"

"Stow that," barked Trask. "We git to pullin' an' haulin' amongst ourselves, we won't get no town records out o' Well City. Now settle down fer about forty minutes. Mickey, get that there phoney seizure paper of yours ready to whip out. You sure it's got enough 'whereas's' on it to keep 'em puzzled ontil we get clear with th' records?"

"That it has," said Mickey Mack. "*And* a gold seal. With ribbons."

"Good. Relax, boys. Talk quiet an' try to keep your hosses offen the rocks."

The posse dismounted and hobbled their mounts. Fellows lounged over to the Well City side of the draw and stood looking out at the half dozen shacks that were the county seat. A few feet down the slope from him were the shadowy masses of a large boulder and a small one. He felt the scalp muscles behind his ears contract at the faint hiss that suddenly reached him from the rocks. He froze, stared. Nothing. As he relaxed, the hiss was repeated.

Now, any other man there would have reported the matter and gotten cover for an investigation. But Fellows's approach was always a direct one. He tiptoed forward, gained the small boulder, waited tensely, then moved on to the larger one. Bracing himself with his hands, he peered carefully around it. Behind him, and between the two boulders, an extension of the black shadow reached out and lifted his gun from his holster, to jam it firmly into his spinal column, just below the shoulder blades.

"Walk," said a faint whisper.

The bruise-making solidity of the gunsight in his back was completely convincing. Without a sound he walked downgrade, without attempting to turn around or to make a sound, and the gun shifted only enough to steer him. His captor kept him to the blackest shadows, and turned him into the mouth of a dry gulch that opened on the draw a hundred yards away. *He won't shoot me if I don't make him,* he thought desperately. *The posse—*

The gun turned him to the wall. He stopped, his hands up. This was it, whatever "it" might be. "Well?" he said softly.

"Hey, boy. Don' be mad, hey."

"Zapappas!"

The gun muzzle rammed in agonizingly. "You be quiet with you mouth."

There was a tense silence, and then Fellows, breathing hard, whispered, "All right, Peri. You talk. I'll listen."

"'At's good, boy," said Pericles in a low voice. "Hey, you t'ink they goin' hang me?"

"Reckon they will, Peri."

"Oh no. No. This wrong. You tell 'em."

"Me? I'd help 'em ef you'd get that equalizer out'n my back."

Surprisingly, Pericles's voice was gentle, and the gun was removed as he said sadly, "Sit down, Fellows. Here. Take you gun."

Fellows stayed, stunned, where he was, face to the rock wall, hands raised, until Pericles's hand on his shoulder turned him around. The little man, he could see dimly, was extending the gun to him. "Sit down, Fellows."

Then he talked. He talked for seven minutes, and it was not a gunshot, but a shout of laughter that brought the posse tumbling down the draw. There was no attack at four o'clock.

The bar of morning sunlight had crept so gradually on to Barstow's sodden face that it had not awakened him. He lay unbeautifully on his back, his collar and belt open, his Eastern clothes rumpled, and his chin higher than his nose.

When the sunlight was abruptly cut off, however, he twitched, turned

his head from side to side, moaned, clasped his temples, and sat up. Keeping his eyes tight shut, he shifted his hands cautiously over them, and in the soothing shade, ventured to ease the lids up. A vast throbbing inside his big head nudged another moan through his dry lips. "What a shindig," he muttered, 'for a county seat. Hate to think of the high-jinks when we get to be a state capital."

Then it was he realized that there was someone standing over him, blocking the sunlight. He looked up quickly, wincing from the effort.

"Git up, Barstow," said Trask. "You're done."

"What are you doing in my—"

"Move," said Trask, and in such a tone that Barstow, without a second thought nor another syllable of bluster, moved. Trask waited while he pulled on his boots, and then stood aside, nodding toward the door. Barstow's gun belt hung over a chair near the window. Trask stood between it and the door. The belt stayed where it was as Barstow walked out.

The Easterner stopped dead as soon as he could see in the light. There was a clump of silent men around the well, watching him.

"H-How— what—" goggled Barstow. He turned, bellowed, "Smith! Oviedo!"

"They took off at daybreak," said Trask quietly. "The rest of your boys are with us, only maybe a little bit madder."

"I don't— I won't—" Barstow began, turning back toward his shack. Trask spun him around, placed his boot in the small of Barstow's back, and shoved. Barstow staggered a few steps, went to his knees, scrambled up again, and went toward the well, purely because the men there seemed less menacing than Trask, who followed close behind.

"Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Jest show you something," said Trask grimly. "Show him, boys."

Rough hands propelled Barstow through the crowd to the well. Fellows caught him there, put a hard young hand to the nape of the flabby neck, and shoved Barstow's head over the coping. "What do you see, Barstow?"

Barstow squirmed. "Nothing."

"Speak up, Barstow."

"The well is dry," said Barstow hoarsely.

"Why, Barstow?"

"Those drunken ——s!" swore Barstow. "They forgot to fill the well!"

"Filled it every night, didn't they, Barstow?"

"They— I—" He looked around at the men, some grinning, some glowering. He gulped and nodded his head.

Fellows guffawed. "That's it, boys. This swamp-frawg had men a-haulin' water from the spring, every night, when the rest o' his crew was sleepin'. Figgered to make this place the county seat, get the railroad through here, an' then sell his holdings an' clear out, leavin' someone else to worry about a dry well an' a useless town."

Barstow put his hands up to his face miserably, and slumped against the well. "What are you—" He licked his lips. "What are you going to do?"

"With you?" said Trask. "Why, we talked it over some. At first most of the boys wanted to throw you into your hole in the ground and fill it in. But we figger we'll do better to tell you how we found out about this, and then turn you loose. We like to think of you rememberin' it."

"It was that little guy you were tryin' to buy into your county seat," grinned Fellows. "Pericles Zapappas, his name is. He got to figgering. He's been in this country a long time, longer'n any of us, an' he knew damn well that there ain't no water to be dug for hereabouts. So he took up your invite an' came over here to look at your well. He was so sure there was somethin' wrong with it that he loaded his mare with two cook pots full of some stuff he brewed. After he left you he circled back and headed for the spring. He seen enough of a beaten track up there to make him think he was right. He dropped his pots into th' spring. They wuz covered with sheep parchment and the stuff in 'em leaked through real slow and flavored up th' water jest fine." He laughed again.

Trask took over. "He loads up his buckboard with hard likker last night and comes over here to help you celebrate gettin' the county seat —*after* goadin' Fellows here to git up a posse to shoot you loose from the county records. So thanks to him, all your hands got drunked up. Once he has you all nice and wound up, he takes a drink of water from the well. It tastes just like he knowed it would—like the stuff he put in the spring. That clinches it. He leaves y'all to waller in his likker and goes up to the draw yonder to wait for us."

"We was goin' to hang him," said Fellows with awe in his voice.

"Tell'm what Zapappas put in the spring, Fellows," said Trask.

"Tamarisk," said Fellows solemnly. "He's a great hand with the spices, he is. Stripped the bark of tamarisk and biled it down. It's bitter as hell. He uses it in his stew."

"Let's go, boys," said Trask. "Zapappas is back in Tamarisk by now, fixin' up the damndest celebration breakfast this country has seen yet."

"What about me?" asked Barstow.

"You could drop dead," said Fellows helpfully.

"Yer county water commission," said Trask, "seems to of stole your hosses. You should be glad. Gives you a chance to walk off some o' that blubber. They's a tradin'-post forty mile up the Valley, and a fort thirty mile the other way."

The last they saw of Barstow was a deflated, dejected figure squatting on the sand by his dry well, in sole possession of a county seat—a ghost town.

Riding through the draw, Trask said thoughtfully to Fellows, "It's a wonderful thing how a man'll fight with his own tools. I seen many a sailor brain people with a fid, and I seen a seamstress run a hatpin into a drunk. Zapappas, he fights right out'n his kitchen."

"Yup," said Fellows. "Usin' only kitchen tools." And he swore to himself to keep his bare back out of sight until those ring-shaped bruises on it disappeared.

Free-for-All

ZANE GREY'S book, "Western Union," an abridged version of which is featured in this issue of ZGWM, is dedicated to "A Single Strand of Iron Wire." The dedication is appropriate, unless we need reminding that behind the stringing of those hundreds of miles of wire were the toil and sweat and blood of hundreds of sturdy Americans—Americans to whom, in the best tradition of our country's growth, the word "failure" had no practical meaning. President Abraham Lincoln told Hiram Sibley, head of the Western Union Telegraph Company, that his idea for a transcontinental telegraph line, while wonderful to contemplate, sounded fantastic and visionary. Nevertheless, he asked Congress for an appropriation to assist in financing such a project.

Before he knew whether or not Congress would consent to such an expenditure of public funds, Sibley laid the proposal before his chief engineer, Edward Creighton, recently returned from a trip to the Pacific coast. Creighton had no illusions as to the tremendous difficulties and hardships which such an undertaking would entail. "The job figures impracticable and impossible," he told his chief, *"but it can be done."*

And it was done. It was not long before Creighton began stringing that "single strand of iron wire" westward out of Omaha, and—in our story—soon thereafter Wayne Cameron, Zane Grey's fictional hero, joins the crew at Gothenburg. From then until the day at Fort Bridger when Creighton himself connects his wire with the one run east from Salt Lake City, and that epochal moment when the first transcontinental telegraphic message, from Chief Justice Field of California to President Lincoln, spans the three thousand miles from Sacramento to Washington, fact and fiction blend to make one of the most enjoyable reading experiences that ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE has yet offered.

● Theodore Sturgeon, author of the leading new short story in this issue, is well known in a far different field of fiction—fantasy—but "Well Spiced", at least to our knowledge, is his

first Western. ZGWM readers will, we are confident, agree that this initial effort is a happy one, for the yarn is unusual in plot and deftly developed. Rivalry for county-seat honors, such as is pictured in "Well Spiced," was not uncommon in the Old West, several instances of kidnapings of the county records having actually occurred. The business of the well, too, is authentic, Ted assures us, having taken place in Boston, Kansas, which fought a triangular battle with Peru and Elk Falls, all in Howard County.

● Wayne D. Overholser, well and favorably known to Western-story readers, makes his first appearance in ZGWM with a dramatic little story, "Debt Canceled." Watch for another Overholser yarn coming soon—"Petticoat Brigade."

● "Schoolmaster Stone Lights the Way," old-ZGWM-hand Joe Hook's story, is also based on matter of historical record. The "Seaburg" of this yarn is the village of Steilacoom (Indian for "lily"), Washington, established in 1851. A serious Indian uprising took place in the region in 1855-1857, and it is a fact that the founder of Steilacoom burned down the schoolhouse in an effort to drive the teacher out of town—a fruitless move, since the citizens built another school and retained the same teacher.

● "If You Don't Get Excited—" is taken from Edwin Corle's book, *Desert Country*. Its high suspense rating was recently acknowledged by no less an authority than Alfred Hitchcock, who included it in his *Fireside Book of Suspense,* recently published by Simon & Schuster.

● Those who remember W. H. Hutchinson's "For Scalps: Pesos" will have approached the same author's "Tall Hat Traders," in this issue, with relish. Hutchinson has again dipped into the dramatic pages of Southwest lore to emerge with a fascinating true story of that region, and we are glad to be able to promise more of like quality for the future. "Buscadero!" for instance, will give us the history of an astounding freebooter of the frontier.

● Bret Harte, regarded by many readers as an unequalled "local color" specialist, is revealed, in "An Ingénue of the Sierras," as just as fully accomplished in constructing a clever plot. The reprinting of the best of these mellow old tales by Bret Harte is one of our pet projects—but let's have your opinions: if you readers like 'em, they'll be continued; if not, they won't.

● *Out of the mailbag:* Margery Meyers of Pecatonica, Illinois, brands ZGWM as tops in entertainment; she enjoys every feature, finding it too difficult a task to decide which she prefers. J. Sutton of Oakland, California, registers strong approval of the back-cover pictures and asks for more verse (that December issue must have pleased him!) To several readers who have requested lists of all of Zane Grey's books: any bookseller should be able to furnish you with such—or ask your local librarian.

● Two announcements of interest to all ZGWM readers! First, letters written to the editors and commenting on the stories or other features of the magazine will—if deemed worthy of being printed in their entirety or quoted from—be paid for at the rate of $3.00 apiece. Second, any questions on Old West subjects sent in by our readers will be answered, either

by direct letter or in the pages of ZGWM, by members of the editorial staff or by reliable authorities co-operating with us. Letters containing either comments or questions should be addressed to ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE, Poughkeepsie, New York.

● *Next Month's ZGWM* will feature a magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's "The Border Legion," a story of outlaws, gold, a gun-slinging hero, and a greatly daring girl. Raymond S. Spears's latest yarn, "Ranger Camp Cook," will lead the short-story brigade, and unless we miss our guess it will register as his finest Western to date. "Paintin' Pistoleer" fans will chuckle over "Souse of the Border," by Walker Tompkins; and a new yarn by J. E. Grinstead—his first after many years of illness—will thrill you. A picture story about Butch Cassidy of the Wild Bunch, and other features and articles will do their bit to furnish you with several evenings of solid reading.

—THE EDITORS.

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LOCO COW

For downright orneriness there is nothing to top the range critter. The range cow is a far cry from the barnyard variety and the shorthorn type. Those sharp, granite-hard horns are not there just as an ornament; they can be mighty useful at times. They can help protect the calves, being more than equalizers against a wolf, f'rinstance. These range mammas can be fightin' fools where their babies are concerned. Jest let 'em hear their calf's beller and they come racing to the rescue with a speed that's hard to believe. The range cow is tough, too, with the guts that never let her say die. In a blizzard, where the barnyard bossy would have given up long before, her range-bred sister only knows that she has to fight and survive. You can help one out of a bog, or rescue her calf out of the barb wire, and all the thanks you get is to have her go for you head down. But, amigo, when a range cow has eaten some loco weed, like the one in this picture, I'd rather do business with a she-grizzly—and get a break, y'betcha!

Dan Muller

THE LOOKOUT Painted by Leonard H. Reedy